



THE DARKEST TOUCH

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Author of Hunting the Demon

He's a hunter, a savior, a seducer.
And she just can't get enough.

THE

DARKEST

TOUCH

Jaci Burton

A DELL BOOK

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FOR MOM. I MISS YOU.

He was assigned to find and retrieve the black diamond. Find Angie and Isabelle.

He'd found Angie, so one step accomplished. But damn, he'd just stepped into a whole hell of a lot more.

Pandora's box had just opened, and he had a feeling he and Angie had just climbed right inside of it.

And despite his anger, his determination to keep his emotional distance, here he sat, with his arms wrapped around Angelique.

And dammit, it felt right.

Not good. Not good at all.

He pushed away and stood, looking down at her. "You okay now?"

She nodded, swung her legs over the bed. "I'll be fine."

"Get dressed. Pack what you can in five minutes. We're getting out of here now before the Sons of Darkness send in round two."

He pivoted and walked away from her, needing the distance. He'd do his job. He'd protect her and he'd bring back the black diamond.

But that's all he was going to do with Angelique. He wasn't going to care about her.

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THE DARKEST TOUCH

PROLOGUE

AUSTRALIA

Like the dark, damp cave Angelique Deveraux stood in, Bart's hands were cold. Icy cold. And he held on to her with a death grip. Try as she might, she couldn't pull away. She shivered and tried to jerk her arm free, but he held tight to her, rambling on and on about her being a catalyst to empower the black diamond. That she was the one they'd been searching for. He held her hand on the black diamond, that once lifeless rock that now glowed with an undulating mystical blue.

This was wrong. She'd been hired to unearth the black diamond. She'd unearthed it, all right. And a whole mess of trouble to go with it, including finding out that her boss, Bart, who she'd thought was the owner of Diavolo Diamonds, was in fact a demon. A demon!

Now she was held in this giant cave, surrounded by Bart's minions—gruesome creatures from the bowels of hell—while Bart conducted a ceremony to bring the black diamond to life using her and Nic, another demon hunter, as catalysts.

Only it wasn't working. As soon as Bart laid her hand on the diamond, the light within the rock extinguished. Bart frowned, looking at her as if she'd caused the light to die, cursing at her, mumbling that she wasn't the one he thought she was.

What was he talking about? Who or what was "the one"?

Fear snaked its way through her nerve endings. The look Bart shot at her was lethal. Her legs began to shake as Bart's grip tightened on her wrist.

"You're hurting me," she whimpered, trying again to break free of his superhuman hold.

Suddenly, Ryder was there, next to her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Ryder and those of his group were demon hunters. Could they defeat Bart and these creatures? She hoped so.

Ryder placed his hand over hers, telling Bart he no longer needed Angelique. Ryder extricated her from Bart's grasp, moving her from the altar and back with the demon hunters. Bart let her go. He let her go! Maybe he had no more use for her, his attention drawn back to the diamond, and to Nic, who remained on the altar.

Angelique took a moment to catch her breath, assess her surroundings. The cave was filled with demons, no way out. She couldn't run.

As an archaeologist, she'd faced down ghosts of the past, worked alone in ruins, and uncovered skeletal remains, always feeling as if she were surrounded by the long-ago dead. It had never bothered her.

But witnessing a demon ritual, seeing creatures from hell, knowing they existed, that she'd somehow become a part of all of it, was more than she could handle. Her mind didn't want to process what Bart had said to her.

"Something big and loud is about to happen," Ryder whispered to her as Bart droned on, conducting some sort of demonic ceremony. "I want you to head out of here as soon as it does. This is your chance to escape."

"How?"

Ryder inclined his head to the back of the room. "As soon as it happens, the demons will come after us and the exit will be clear. Head that way."

She frowned, not liking the idea of leaving him. "What about you and the others?"

Ryder and the rest of his crew of demon hunters, known as the Realm of Light, had amassed in this cave to fight the Sons of Darkness. They were currently surrounded by demons—huge, monstrous creatures that would frighten even the most sturdy adult. The creatures towered over the humans.

Some were massive, others fast and deadly with their dripping, toxic claws and teeth. She couldn't imagine doing battle with those things.

"We're here for the duration. We've got to fight them. You don't have the training, and I can't take them on and protect you at the same time, so I need you out of the way."

He was right. She had no idea how to battle these creatures. But she didn't want to leave. There were so many questions she didn't have answers to yet.

Somehow Ryder sensed her reluctance, because his gaze narrowed. "I mean it, Angie."

She inhaled, letting it out on a resigned sigh. Thoughts of protest hovered on her lips, but she bit them back. She was a hindrance and would get in the way. And she did really want to get out of this with her life. "Okay, I'll run."

"Good. Hang outside the cave entrance and wait for us."

He started to turn away, but she held tight to his hand, forcing him to look at her.

"What?"

"Please be careful." She wanted to see him again, to explain the reason she'd brought the black diamond to Bart. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't a treasure hunter, no matter what Ryder might think. She hadn't had a choice. She hadn't known what Bart was.

"I'll be okay," Ryder said. "We'll talk when all this is over."

She released his hand and began to drift toward the back of the cave. Just then, an explosion of lightning struck in the vicinity of the demon hunters. Growls mixed with shouts as the hunters engaged in battle with the demons. Smoke filled the room and the smell of melting demon assailed her nostrils.

Ick.

That was her cue. She ran like hell through the tunnels, her heart pounding, her steps unsure as she felt along the dark passageway. Afraid that someone or something would follow her, she tore ahead at a fast pace, the hairs on the back of her neck rising. She was certain some claw-handed creature was going to grab her by the throat any second. She made it halfway, her lungs burning, her legs feeling like rubber, until she couldn't push any farther. She stopped to catch her breath. Her legs shook so much she was afraid she was going to slump to the ground. She was drenched in sweat, the result of fear and the rush of adrenaline from her flight to freedom.

When she could breathe normally again, when her blood no longer rushed like pounding waves in her ears, she heard it. Or rather, didn't hear it.

The cave she'd run from had gone deathly quiet. Even while she'd been running, she'd heard the sounds of the battle echoing down the cavern. Now it was completely silent.

Unnerving. What had happened back there? Was Ryder all right? What about the others? She strained to hear the sounds of rushing footsteps. He said they'd meet her outside after they took care of the demons, but she didn't hear them coming.

She needed to get out of here. What she was contemplating was a bad idea, something her sister would do.

Don't do it, Angelique. This isn't brave, it's stupid.

She was going to do it, anyway. She had to know, had to check on Ryder. He could be hurt and she might be the only one who could help him, or go for help if he and the others needed it.

She turned and headed back, first walking, then running again. But this time, she was running toward the cave, unable to stop herself. When she got to the cave entrance, she stopped, certain she was going to see the hunters' bodies sprawled everywhere, dead; massacred by those hideous creatures.

And then what are you going to do, Angelique? Fight demons on your own?

Why was she doing this?

Because Ryder would do the same for her. He wouldn't leave her behind.

Just a peek, then she'd run again. She was strong, fast. She could do it. She edged around the corner.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the room and made a quick scan, fully expecting those hideous creatures to turn on her next.

Stunned, she blinked, then frowned.

The room was completely empty.

Where had they all gone? The way she came was the only tunnel, the only exit.

She moved into the room and looked around, wondering if she'd somehow missed another passageway.

No, she'd been right. There was no other way out.

Where were they?

She moved toward the altar where Bart had conducted the ceremony. The hunters were gone, the demons nowhere to be seen. Everyone and everything was gone.

But the black diamond remained.

Why would they have left the black diamond here? It was vitally important to both the Realm of Light and the Sons of Darkness. The Sons of Darkness claimed it had the ability to empower the demons. The Realm of Light vowed to stop them from engaging the gem's power source.

Yet they had all disappeared and left the black diamond behind.

For how long, though?

She sucked in a breath, remembering how she had felt when Bart had grabbed her wrist and placed her hand over the diamond. The hum, the energy—such raw power emanated from the gem. And then all that beautiful power had simply gone cold and dark.

Because she wasn't the right person to bring its power to fruition.

The black diamond wasn't from this world; she knew that much about it. Other than that, it remained a mystery. A giant, beautiful, incredibly frightening mystery.

And they'd just abandoned it? Something was very wrong about that.

Indecision plagued her. What should she do? Leave it here? What if the demons came back?

No. That wasn't an option.

Before she changed her mind, she scanned the room and saw one of the hunter's bags, hurried over and grabbed it, then lifted her arms around the diamond. It had to weigh about ten pounds, and was the size of a bowling ball. It no longer glowed with brilliant blue light as it had when Nic had placed his hand on it. But then again, Nic was half human and half demon, so he'd had the power to bring forth the magic within it. But maybe not enough power? Was that why they thought they'd needed her?

So many questions. No answers.

She had to take it before the Sons of Darkness came back and took possession of it. Before something really bad happened.

Like her twin sister Isabelle showing up and finding the diamond. She'd suspected Isabelle was around here somewhere. She was always lurking near Angelique's digs, so it wouldn't surprise her at all. Izzy had no scruples. It would be just like her sister to try to wrangle the diamond out from under her, then sell it to the highest bidder.

And that could be disaster.

She slid the diamond into the bag, then hightailed it out of the cave as fast as she could, still expecting demons to be hot on her tail. When she reached the exit, she sucked in a huge breath of air, not caring how hot it was outside. She was free of the cave, and she had the black diamond.

She leaned against the cave wall, waiting for what seemed like hours.

Surely Ryder and the others would come.

They didn't. And the longer she waited, the more certain she was they weren't coming.

Time for Plan B. Ryder might have wanted her to hang out and wait for him, but it was obvious that wasn't going to happen, so she had to make some decisions of her own.

Regret pounded at her. Ryder was going to hate her for taking it. If he was still alive.

And what if he wasn't? Her stomach twisted.

No emotion. Think logically. If he wasn't alive, she was on her own. With the black diamond. It was her responsibility now, and she couldn't let the Sons of Darkness have it.

She had to get away from this area, out of the country, away from the demons, too. She had to hide the black diamond, gather her bearings, then figure out what she was going to do about all this. She couldn't stop to think right now. She *couldn't* think. There was too much information to process. She needed time.

She'd find a way to get in touch with Ryder and the Realm of Light, to get the black diamond back to them. She just couldn't chance the Sons of Darkness grabbing it.

God, she wished she knew more, but she was still in the dark about so many things.

Like being “the one.” Bart had been convinced it was her, as if he’d known all along she had some kind of power over the diamond.

But she didn’t. And if she didn’t wield the power, it was a logical leap as to who could.

Angelique shivered as a cold chill skittered down her spine.

Isabelle.

The one.

No matter how many times she tried to push it out of her mind, it kept coming back.

Isabelle.

Knowing Isabelle, it made sense.

Bart had chosen the wrong sister.

And if the Sons of Darkness wanted Isabelle and the black diamond, the Realm of Light would want her, too.

She couldn’t let that happen. She and Izzy might have spent their lives at odds with each other, but she’d promised their mother she would protect Isabelle.

Her heart clenched at what she had to do. It felt like a betrayal. Ryder had asked her to wait for him, and she wasn’t going to.

She was taking the black diamond with her, but she didn’t see any other way. She had to go, had to hide the diamond, keep it away from the Sons of Darkness.

Dear God, even from the Realm of Light.

And from her sister.

She was in this alone. Ryder couldn't help her. For all she knew he could be dead. They could all be dead in there, and the Sons of Darkness could, at this very moment, be looking for the black diamond.

She felt a sharp stab of pain in her middle at the thought of Ryder lying in a pool of blood on the floor of that cold, dark cave, then shoved it aside, refusing to face it.

Quit thinking. Move!

She glanced over her shoulder at the yawning cave entrance. "I'm sorry, Ryder," she whispered, fighting back tears.

She pushed away from the wall of the cave and started running.

CHAPTER ONE

Two months later

SICILY, ITALY

Ryder was hunting again, and damn, it felt good. To be on his own, with no one to tell him what to do and when or how to do it.

It was like being back in the military again—Special Forces—the best of the best and in charge of his own destiny. He'd loved the life back then, and he'd done it for ten years before deciding all the killing was just a little too enjoyable. That's when his loner status had ended. He'd gotten out, gone back home a hero, and then shortly thereafter been recruited for the so-called reality show that had made him a demon hunter.

Now he was killing again. But this time, he killed demons for a living, and he didn't work alone anymore. He liked the other demon hunters just fine, but he was used to this isolation, to a one-man operation, and this is what he preferred—stalking his prey one-on-one.

His lips curled as he thought about that prey—Angelique. Out of all the demon hunters, he was the most suited to find her. Ryder knew more about Angelique than any of the others, could complete this assignment better than they could. He'd touched her, gotten inside her head, had spent more time with her than they had.

He knew her lies.

And now that he'd found her, had her cornered, it was just a matter of sneaking up on her and grabbing her and the black diamond.

Providing she had it on her, which if she did would be really stupid.

Angelique might be a lot of things, but Ryder didn't think for one second that she was stupid. So she probably didn't have it there at the tiny house

she'd rented.

It was isolated, but in an open area. He had good camouflage, though, since there was an abandoned, thickly covered vineyard behind the house, with dense trees and bushes, which was where he'd set up. The house was located in the midst of all this foliage. If not for the narrow road and driveway, the average person might never locate this place. Perfect spot for someone who didn't want to be found.

Ryder was good at finding people who didn't want to be found. He'd vowed to unearth every bit of dirt on her if he had to work twenty-four hours a day to do it. She'd screwed him, and not in the fun way. She'd used him to get her hands on the diamond, and then she'd run.

But not nearly far enough, because he'd found her. And now that he had, he wasn't going to let her go again.

Once he located her house, he'd hidden out, waiting to see how populated this area was.

It wasn't. At all. No traffic traveled this road, so he'd waited until nightfall, then hid his car within a dense area of bushes behind the property.

He'd followed a seldom-used footpath leading up toward the house. Thick with shrubbery along each side, it kept him shielded from the back of the house. He could see no light through the windows, so he hoped she was asleep.

The path wound around parallel to the curved drive—easy enough to keep watch for cars, though judging from the lack of traffic he didn't expect anyone to come this way. He finally found a spot where the house came into view, and he settled there. It was on higher ground, giving him a great vantage point to see everything. He could see the back door of the house, and keep his eye on the drive in case Angelique left.

He leaned against a tree, figuring he'd just watch for a while, see what she did, get a handle on her routine for a day or so. He'd been single-minded in

purpose since Lou had given him the assignment. Single-minded with a vengeance, in fact.

And angry. Damned angry.

It was time to back off, gather a little distance from his subject, and make sure he remained detached from what he was doing.

Just a job, Ryder. She's just a job.

Yeah, right. He was thinking about his job. He was thinking betrayal, anger. They seethed inside him. He recognized them for what they were. Emotions. That was bad shit. He liked it better when emotion didn't enter the equation at all, when he could go about his business and not think about anything or anyone but his work. He wasn't his father, imagining slights and insults that weren't there, barreling through life with a tornadic fury of anger that was almost visible, all of it imagined, internal demons his old man fought no doubt his entire life. His father had been fucked-up for as long as Ryder could remember. Probably insane, but never got treatment, instead set loose upon his family to wreak whatever havoc he chose. And it had been bad havoc. Frightening. Ugly. Painful, both physically and mentally.

He'd long ago vowed to never be like his old man. The old man had just enjoyed inflicting pain. Ryder figured his father had done it to release his own internal demons.

Whatever. Ryder preferred being grounded in reality. And reality meant a laser in his hand, a demon he could see, and a kill he could verify. His reality was demon body count—not some mental bullshit that screwed with a warrior's reality. He could overcome the weird stuff. He wasn't at all like his father. Hadn't he spent his entire adult life proving that?

As long as he remained aloof, his focus on killing demons, he'd be okay. There was no emotion involved in demon hunting, which suited him just fine.

He'd screwed up with Angelique. He'd let her get close. He'd talked to her. He'd kissed her.

Angelique made him think, made him feel. She'd brought out emotion in him.

That made her dangerous.

He'd convinced Lou, their leader and a Keeper of the Realm of Light, that he could handle this—find Angelique, figure out where the black diamond was, and bring her, and it, back to the Realm of Light.

Ryder had never failed on a mission before. He didn't intend to now. All he had to do was wait it out. Angelique would lead him to the black diamond.

One way or the other.

Just as he started to relax, one of the curtains moved downstairs and Angelique's face appeared, peering through the window. This was the first time he'd seen a glimpse of her since she'd arrived in her car this afternoon and gone straight inside.

He peeked through the foliage, hoping like hell she wouldn't walk outside.

Nothing. The curtain was back in place, the light was on, and all he could see now was her shadow within the house.

The shades were all drawn and he watched her silhouette moving about in one of the rooms downstairs. He had blueprints of the floor plan of the house, so he knew the layout. Downstairs kitchen and living room. Upstairs one bedroom and bath. Small, cozy, room for one or two people, max. His audio equipment picked up everything going on inside. There wasn't anyone else in there with her, and she hadn't used the phone, because he was tracking her cellular calls, too. She didn't even talk to herself.

He heard the sounds of cooking, the shower running, then all the lights went out about eleven P.M., so she obviously went to bed.

He glanced down at his watch. Almost midnight. Good thing it was warm outside. He crawled out and parked it on a thick slab of rock, figuring his equipment would alert him if anything happened. He had to get at least a little sleep or he'd be useless. Though he could go a day or two max without any rest, he preferred to maintain mental alertness, since he had no idea what to expect. As far as the Realm of Light knew, Angelique may have already made contact with her sister, Isabelle, and the two of them had planned to do something with the black diamond. And since none of them had managed to find Isabelle yet, they were hoping Angelique would lead them to her. Though the hunters were out searching for Isabelle, too.

Maybe they'd find Isabelle first.

It was a waiting game now. Ryder hoped he didn't have to wait too long.

He jerked awake at a sound, immediately glancing down at his watch. It was three in the morning. Shit. Blinking away the fog of sleep, he listened intently, wondering if Angelique was up. No lights. So what had he heard?

Something crashed inside, like a lamp. He shot up to a standing position, saw a flicker of light, then darkness again. His senses on full alert now, he wondered if maybe she'd just gotten up and knocked the lamp over. Maybe she had a bad dream.

He knew all about nightmares. He'd lived through a few of them. The shit going down around him the past six months seemed like a living nightmare. Sometimes he didn't want to close his eyes.

He didn't hear anything now. Not wanting to reveal his hand and go running in there, he paused, but grabbed his weapon and readied himself, just in case.

He wished he'd had time to install surveillance cameras inside, but that was going to have to wait until the next time she left the house. Then he'd have eyes and ears. Still, his skin prickled with unease, and whenever that happened it meant something bad was going on.

He didn't like this. Something wasn't right. He moved through the bushes, into the vineyard and toward the house, making no sound. Approaching the back door first, he made a slight turn on the knob. It was locked. That was a good thing. He moved to the window, peering in through the sheer drapes, using his night vision shades to help him discern objects in the pitch blackness.

No activity. Angelique wasn't downstairs. His ear comm was connected to his audio equipment, and he could hear her breathing now.

But it wasn't normal, restful breathing like she was sleeping.

It was deep and ragged.

The breaths of terror. She wasn't speaking, as if her mouth was covered. He didn't know how the hell he knew this; he just did. She was being restrained, and she was petrified.

Goddamit. He had to get in the house now.

So much for surveillance.

Though he'd like to kick the damn door down and rush upstairs, he couldn't do that. Not without assessing the situation first. Which meant he had to take the time to pick the lock.

Precious seconds ticked by as he grabbed his pick and worked the simple lock. Thankfully, she didn't have major armor installed on the door. Bad move on her part, really good for him. In a few seconds, the lock clicked. He winced at the sound and pushed the door open, hoping it wouldn't creak.

It didn't. He left the door open, and moved inside, taking each step with care. He already knew where the stairs were and headed at them, wanting to bound up there, but resisting.

Slow. Measured steps. Make sure not to alert whoever was upstairs.

Patience, something that was in short supply right now. Weapon trained, he reached the top of the stairs and heard the whispers.

“Tell me where the black diamond is or I will cut out your heart and eat it. And you’ll still be alive to watch me.”

Cold dread poured through Ryder as he surveyed the scene. A dark shadow loomed over Angelique. She was lying in bed, her body pressed to the mattress, the man’s hands wrapped around her throat.

But who held her? Was it a demon? It definitely wasn’t a hybrid. They smelled so bad he’d have known one was in the house as soon as he walked in. And those foul-smelling hulking bastards didn’t speak.

Angelique must be frozen in fear, because she hadn’t uttered a single word, her eyes wide as she stared at her attacker, whose face was only inches from hers.

The bastard was going to die. First thing Ryder had to do was get the guy’s—or thing’s—attention. He pulled a knife out of the sheath at his belt, took careful aim, and let it sail through the air. It caught the guy in the upper back, right between the shoulder blades.

Instead of jumping up or falling in pain, the creature—because that had to be what it was—calmly stood and turned to Ryder.

Well, hell. Its eyes glowed a pale blue. Pure demon, maybe? Their eyes were pale blue, but Ryder didn’t remember seeing their eyes glow in the dark like that. Almost fluorescent.

The creature advanced on him.

“Angelique, get ready to run,” Ryder said, unable to determine if she was in shock, or hurt, or whether she could even hear him. All his concentration was on the thing headed his way.

“She’s not going to do anything you say. She’s mine now,” the dark thing said, inching closer to Ryder.

Without hesitation, Ryder raised his laser and fired a stream of ultraviolet light. Human or demon, it didn’t matter. Either one would die.

The light struck the creature and it paused, looking down at the blue fluid spreading over its chest and midsection. Its arms raised out to its sides as it frowned at Ryder, then let out a pained growl.

“That hurts.”

It kept coming. Okay, not supposed to happen. UV lasers killed demons. And it sure as hell would toast a human. So what was this thing? Ryder braced and fired another round, but obviously his laser wasn't going to work. He shouldered it and went for the microwave gun, blasting the creature and hoping to melt it from the inside out.

Again, nothing. Other than irritation and a slight pause, that was about it. The damn thing smirked at him. It knew Ryder's weapons would have no effect.

Fuck. Ryder backed up, wanting to draw the thing away from Angelique. He moved down the hallway toward the stairs. The thing kept pace with him, not rushing him, as if he was toying with Ryder, as if this was some kind of game.

Fine with Ryder. As long as he could get the creature away from Angelique, he was willing to play. He backed down the stairs, one slow step at a time, hoping it would follow.

It did.

Ryder continued backward, pulling his knife as he did. The high-tech weapons weren't working, so maybe something more basic would.

“Come on,” he said to the creature, widening his stance and holding the knife out.

The thing looked at the knife, then back at Ryder. “You can't kill me.”

“Everything can die,” Ryder returned as the creature maintained its distance. It didn't seem to be in any hurry to attack Ryder. Maybe it was

waiting for him to make the first move, or maybe it was just confident that it was going to win.

Overconfidence was a bad thing. Ryder hoped so. He was ready for anything.

“You are human,” it said. “I can smell it on you, just as I smell it on her.”

“Your point?” They’d made it to the living room. They were circling each other now, like wrestlers in the ring before the attack.

“I was human. Once.”

What the hell did that mean? What was this creature? “You’re not human now.”

Its lips curled, revealing sharp teeth. Ryder made a mental note to avoid those. “No, I’m not. I’m stronger. I have power. They promised me great things, and immortality.” It sucked in a breath, its chest expanding. “I’m tired of toying with you, waiting for you to move, human. I have things to do.”

“Then let’s dance.”

“The Sons of Darkness have come for what is theirs.” The creature lunged and Ryder sidestepped just before it reached him, then he pivoted and shoved his knife in the left side of the creature’s back, hoping to hit a vital organ. It tilted its head back and roared an unholy sound. Ryder pulled the knife just as the thing turned around and reached for him.

Ryder glanced at his knife. Blood. Good. If it could bleed, it could die.

The thing came after him again, and this time Ryder met him. It grabbed Ryder by the shoulders and pushed. Ryder went flying, but he held on to the creature, jamming his blade into its heart, using leverage to push the demon up and over him, even as Ryder was sliding backward clear across the room. A loud crash as the thing hit the wall and Ryder slammed into a table. He winced at the pain, but shrugged it off and leaped to his feet.

The creature stood, limping, blood pouring from the wound at its chest. It was weakening and looked up at Ryder, surprise clearly showing on its face.

“What is in . . . the knife?”

Ryder looked down at the blade, then smiled as he met the creature’s pained eyes. “Silver.”

The creature shook its head. “They told me I would live forever.” It looked down at its bloody hands, let out a roar of frustration, then disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

What the hell? Ryder stalked to the area where the thing had just stood. Nothing. Only a pool of blood.

He’d never seen any of the demons do shit like that before. He walked outside, looked in both directions, saw nothing, then shut the door behind him and hurried upstairs to Angelique. She was lying in bed, exactly as he had found her. She hadn’t moved and her eyes were still wide open. She had a vacant look, almost as if she was under some kind of spell. He dropped his weapons, sat on the edge of the bed, and grabbed her shoulders.

“Angelique.” He purposely kept his voice low. “Angie, it’s Ryder.”

She didn’t move, didn’t acknowledge his presence. This time, he shook her. “Hey, wake up. It’s over.”

Still no response. He finally lifted her, laid her head in the crook of his arms. “Angie, wake up.” He tapped her cheek, then slapped it lightly. “Come on. Snap out of this, goddamit.”

When he still didn’t get a response, he gave her one hard slap.

She gasped, then screamed, her hands coming up to palm his chest and push, hard. He didn’t let go.

“Come on, darlin’, it’s Ryder. It’s okay, it’s over. He’s gone.”

Still, she fought him, kicking her legs and feet underneath the covers, her eyes filled with terror. He held tight to her, bringing her up against him, wrapping his arms around her body. Her skin was ice cold. She was shaking, and he couldn't imagine what she had gone through, having that thing put some kind of mind hold on her and then terrorize her like that.

Finally, she stopped fighting him, but she was still shivering. She pushed away, searching his face, her breathing harsh gasps. "Ryder."

He nodded, realizing that with his night vision shades on he could see her, but she couldn't see him. She needed the comfort of light. "Yeah. The lamp's broken or I'd turn it on. But it's me. Stay here and I'll find the ceiling light switch."

He left her for only a second. She was reluctant to let go of him. "I promise. I'm just going to get us some light." She finally released her death grip on him. He found the switch, pulled off his glasses, and bathed the room in soft light.

Holy Christ. Her hair was a tangled dark mess around her face and shoulders, her eyes wide green pools of fear. The sheet had fallen to her waist, revealing small, upturned breasts—damn perfect, too—pink nipples and golden skin. His gaze shot back up to her stricken face and he hurried over to her side of the bed again. She was still shaking. He grabbed his jacket out of the bag at his feet and lifted her arms, sliding her into it, though he wasn't sure if it was to warm her or cover her body from his gaping gaze.

"What . . . what was that?" she asked, her voice a croaking whisper. "A demon?"

"I don't know. I guess. Never seen one like that."

"Me, either." She was still breathing hard. He slid his fingers over her pulse. Too damn fast. He rubbed his thumb over her wrist. God, her hand was cold.

"He . . . it wanted the black diamond."

“I figured. Is it here, in this house?”

She shook her head, pieces of her hair sliding across her cheek as she dropped her head to her chin. “No. It’s not here.”

He should be pissed. He had a million questions to ask her, should tell her she got what she deserved after taking off with the black diamond. He had come for the same thing—to get it back. Now was the time to figure out where it was.

But looking at her shaking like this, he couldn’t do it. He had to get Angie out of this house, away from that thing and whatever else the Sons of Darkness were going to send her way. He had to contact the Realm of Light, report what he’d seen, gather some intelligence.

He had to protect Angie, before another of those creatures came back. Or something worse.

He was assigned to find and retrieve the black diamond. Find Angie and Isabelle.

He’d found Angie, so one step accomplished. But damn, he’d just stepped into a whole hell of a lot more.

Pandora’s box had opened, and he had a feeling he and Angie had just climbed right inside of it.

And despite his anger, his determination to keep his emotional distance, here he sat, with his arms wrapped around Angelique.

And dammit, it felt right.

Not good. Not good at all.

He pushed away and stood, looking down at her. “You okay now?”

She nodded, swung her legs over the bed. “I’ll be fine.”

“Get dressed. Pack what you can in five minutes. We’re getting out of here now before the Sons of Darkness send in round two.”

He pivoted and walked away from her, needing the distance. He’d do his job. He’d protect her and he’d bring back the black diamond.

But that’s all he was going to do with Angelique. He wasn’t going to care about her.

CHAPTER TWO

Ryder had found them a new place to stay—clear across the island from where they had been.

This house was as remote as one could get. Like a stronghold on top of a hill, it was a tiny stone cottage, one story, with jutting rocks surrounding it and brush weaving in and out as camouflage. No other houses in the vicinity, either. None for miles, actually.

Angelique was glad for Ryder's company, because they would be utterly isolated here.

When they'd first arrived to case the area, instead of using the driveway, Ryder had walked them down to the water's edge and examined the cliffs. Definitely inaccessible enough and only one way in, and it wasn't via the steep cliffs. Without adequate climbing gear, no one could get up the back way and hide deep within the rocky crags. One slip and they'd be dead meat.

It was a perfect house to hide out. And it had been vacant. Ryder had contacted the rental agent first thing in the morning, and offered up an obscene amount of money for an immediate move-in. Maybe the place was so remote no one wanted it. The rental agent had given them the keys, and an hour later they were back at the house.

Ryder had been strangely silent while she packed up her essential things last night, then shoved her and them in his car along with his gear. She'd stayed silent as well, though she knew it was only a matter of time before Ryder would demand information.

She'd slept only fitfully in the car while Ryder had done all the driving. She'd been way too keyed up, too afraid of monsters jumping out at her around every corner. She'd sleep when she calmed down.

Or maybe never. Would she ever get the vision of that creature waking her up out of her mind? Its cold hand slamming down over her mouth to drown out her scream? The threats of cutting her throat, the powerful strength of its body pressing down upon her as she lay helpless in her bed?

What if Ryder hadn't been there? What would have happened?

She shivered and pulled her sweater around her chest. Despite the warmth of the sun pouring in through the open windows of the vehicle, she could still feel the demon's icy fingers touching her.

She might never be warm again.

Ryder drove into the open garage and they hopped out, unpacked and stepped through the door leading from the garage into the house.

"This is lovely, Ryder."

He seemed to be paying no attention to the inside of the house, only peering outside before looking back at her. "Uh-huh."

She, however, was looking her fill. "It's quaint and small and intimate. And the garden is lovely. There's even a small pool out back." She wandered through the kitchen and out the back door.

The pool was small, but it was sunny, and well guarded by the high stone wall and lots of greenery. Beyond the edge of the wall was the cliff. No way someone could come at them. Unless they materialized in a puff of smoke.

She shuddered at the memory.

How had they found her, anyway? Both the demon and Ryder? Another question she filed away for later.

The living room had two sofas. Stone sofas, actually, with thick pillows like futons. Stone coffee table and end tables to match the rock walls. It would stay cool in here without air-conditioning.

One bedroom and a king-sized bed.

“You can take the bedroom,” he said to Angelique over her shoulder as she leaned against the doorway to the room.

“Where will you sleep?”

She turned around to face him, noticing he backed up a step.

He shrugged. “I don’t sleep much. When I need to conk out I’ll use the couch.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle, confused by the distance he put between them. “I see.”

“We’ll have to share the one bathroom, though.”

“Of course. Unless you want to bathe in the pool.”

“I’ll pass.” He walked away and out the back door.

Okay, so her attempt at humor had failed. Ryder wasn’t in a good mood. Not that she could blame him. She probably wasn’t his favorite person right now, considering her theft of the black diamond. He’d no doubt been assigned to retrieve it, and her, and hadn’t expected to fight demons in the process.

She hadn’t expected to be awakened by one in her bedroom last night. Memories of those glowing eyes in the darkness still made her stomach twist. Shaking her head to block out the visual, she walked outside and joined Ryder. He leaned against the post on the covered porch. She took a seat in the white rocker, enjoying the bliss of the warm day, the fragrant flowers, wishing this were a vacation, that she had no cares in her life. She wished a lot of things were different.

But that wasn’t the case.

“How did the demon find me, Ryder?”

He continued to look out toward the sea. “I don’t know. You must have left them some clue to your whereabouts.”

“I didn’t leave any clues.”

He turned his head and looked at her. “I found you, didn’t I?”

“You’re human. And you have the Realm of Light to help you along.”

His gaze narrowed. “And they’re demons. They have connections even I don’t have. Don’t ever underestimate them.”

“Point taken.”

“Where’s the black diamond, Angie?”

She shook her head, not at all surprised. “That didn’t take long, did it?”

“Did you really expect me to beat around the bush?”

She pulled her knees up to her chest, too tired to do battle with him but knowing it was inevitable. “I guess not.”

“Answer my question.”

“I don’t have it.”

“Obviously. I searched the house last night. So where is it?”

His voice was cold, his tone clipped. She bristled, wishing for the warmth, the patience he had shown her last night. “It’s safe.”

“Where?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You mean you won’t.”

“No, I won’t.”

He inhaled, then let it out in an audible sigh that spoke of frustration. Tough. She was frustrated, too, and had been for months now. She had

questions for which there were no answers; she had been searching endlessly for her sister, with no results. So he could just join her in her disappointment party.

He chose a seat on the chair across from hers, though he wasn't relaxing. Tension coiled in the way he balanced on the edge of the cushion, as if he expected to leap to his feet at any second. His dark gaze probed her. "Do you remember what happened in Australia?"

She nodded.

"And you still think you can control the black diamond?"

"I'm not controlling it. I'm hiding it."

Ryder dragged his fingers through his hair, then shook his head. "You can't hide it from the Sons of Darkness, Angie. They'll find it. They found you, and it's only a matter of time before they locate the diamond. We can't let that happen."

"They won't find the diamond. Trust me."

His response was to snort. Rather loudly. Okay, so he had no reason to trust her, she'd give him that. Still, his attitude hurt.

"Ryder, I have it hidden someplace safe. Somewhere the Sons of Darkness can't get to."

"You don't know that. It's safer with the Realm of Light."

"Oh, right. So you can use it, and my sister?"

His frown sharpened. "The Realm of Light doesn't want to use the black diamond or your sister."

She looked past him, where the sunlight filtered through the trees. "I can't be sure of that. I'm the only one who can protect her."

"Where is Isabelle?"

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to locate her yet.”

“I’d have thought you’d have been in contact with her.”

“Uh, no.”

“Why not?”

“I have no idea. She doesn’t answer her cell phone. I managed to track her here because she was scheduled to do a dig somewhere in the south of Italy. That’s as far as I’ve gotten. I’ve hunted down every ongoing archaeological dig in the area. No one can confirm she’s on a site.”

“Do you think someone could be covering for her?”

She shrugged. “It’s possible, but I don’t know why she’d hide from me.”

“Maybe she’s hiding from someone else. Does she have enemies?”

Angelique laughed. “Izzy makes a lot of enemies. When you hunt treasure for financial gain, you always manage to piss someone off. I’ve run interference for her in the past, so I know she’s irritated buyers, local governments, you name it.”

“Why would she avoid you?”

“I don’t know.” That’s the question Angelique had been asking herself ever since she arrived in Italy and started tracking her sister. She and Izzy hadn’t always gotten along. Okay, who was she kidding? That was an understatement. Isabelle knew that Angelique didn’t approve of her treasure hunting. But they’d always been in contact. In fact, Angelique typically couldn’t make a move without finding Isabelle underfoot and in her business. In business, they were competitors. That meant where Angelique was, Izzy usually showed up. And Angelique always kept an eye on her sister’s digs to make sure she didn’t get in trouble.

Because where Izzy went, trouble usually followed; something typically went wrong. And Angelique sometimes had to come to the rescue. Izzy

counted on Angelique to be there for her. So she always let Angelique know where she was.

So why the disappearing act now? Something wasn't right about that.

"Is it unusual for you to be unable to contact her?" Ryder asked.

"Yes." She could at least be honest about that much. "Isabelle is always within reach. We tend to work in the same areas. She's always in my business. More often than I want her to be, usually. That's what I don't understand. She wasn't in Australia, and I can't make contact with her."

When she looked up, Ryder was staring at her, his dark eyes showing that warmth she had grown accustomed to seeing.

"You're worried about her."

"Yes."

"Do you have any reason to suspect something's happened to her?"

Angelique fought back tears, refusing to speculate on the worst possible scenario. "No. I'd feel it if something had happened to her."

"The twin connection?"

She nodded. "Discounted by professionals, but it's true. When we were kids and one of us was hurt, the other would always know it. And we could sense each other's moods and anxieties." It annoyed them both when they got older, having that close a tie to each other. They had both wanted separation and individuality, but the tie had still been there.

"But you don't sense that your sister is . . ."

Even though Ryder had trailed off, Angelique knew what he'd avoided saying, so she finished it for him. "No. She's not dead. She's probably into something she shouldn't be and she doesn't want me to know about it. That has to be the reason for the lack of contact, and she's pissing me off because she's avoiding me."

Angry was better than worried. Anger kept her going. If she thought about the alternative, she'd drown in a sea of despair. She couldn't lose her sister. Isabelle was all the family she had left.

Ryder leaned forward. "Don't worry. The Realm of Light has hunters spread throughout the country looking for her, too. It's only a matter of time before she's found."

Angelique didn't know whether that was a good or bad thing. She wanted to find Isabelle, wanted to assess her condition, both physical and mental. Angelique had questions, concerns. Major concerns, after what she'd seen and learned in Australia.

If the Realm of Light found Isabelle first, what then?

Once again, the situation was out of her hands, and she didn't like it one bit.

CHAPTER THREE

Isabelle Deveraux needed a boat. Like right now.

Unfortunately, funds were short and she didn't think she could rent one on her looks alone, though if the situation became desperate, she wasn't above putting on a short skirt, doing her hair, slapping on some lipstick, and vamping it up for one of the many wealthy yacht owners in the harbor.

Provided she didn't end up shot, stabbed, or strangled by some rich guy's wife or—even worse—mistress. No, there had to be another way.

How would Angelique handle a situation like this?

The right way, of course.

Her sweet sister. Even now, she could feel her, that sense of goodness, like the beacon in a lighthouse, showing her the way. Thinking of Angelique was always like feeling a warm blanket pulled over her, protecting her, sheltering her from everything bad.

Everything dark.

She shook it off.

Angelique couldn't help her.

Not in this, and not anymore. She was on her own.

What she needed was to be out in the water, and by God she was going to get there one way or the other. There was treasure out there just waiting for her. Her entire body tingled in anticipation. If she could, she'd walk off the sandy beach nearby and straight into the sea in order to get to it. It was out

there—the find of the century. And it was hers for the taking, if only she could get to it.

Walking into the ocean wasn't very practical, though.

She turned and faced the little village, scrunching her nose as she tried to think. It was early, the sun barely rising over the top of the hill. Soon it would shine down over the sleepy rows of houses packed tightly together in jagged rows.

Coffee. That's what she needed. She walked the few steps from the harbor to the café and ordered a cappuccino, then sat at one of the outside tables and pondered her dilemma, hoping for a miracle.

Ha. Miracle. Divine intervention. Fat chance of that happening, considering what she knew about herself. She'd have better luck making a deal with the devil.

“I hear you're looking for a boat.”

She looked up into the face of a shadowy figure looming over her. Satan himself, perhaps?

Great leaps in logic there, Izzy. “Excuse me?”

The man took a seat across from her and placed his cup of coffee on the table. “You're looking for a boat.”

American accent. Damn fine-looking, too. Dark hair, smoldering, sexy eyes, chiseled features that looked as though Michelangelo himself had sculpted him. He was perfection, a god in human form. Tanned, muscular, and quite possibly her savior if she could believe what he was saying.

“You have a boat?”

“I do.”

“You want to rent it to me.”

“No, I’m offering you a ride out on it. I hear you’re an archaeologist.”

“Where did you hear that?”

He smiled, showing brilliant white, even teeth which were also perfect. Didn’t this guy have any flaws? “From the twenty or so other boat owners in the harbor who warned me about you.”

She frowned, thinking of all the time she’d wasted going from boat to boat, only to be shooed away as an annoyance, as if she was some beggar asking for a handout. She would have paid for their services. Eventually. “I see. So why did you come looking for me?”

“Because I could use your expertise.”

“You don’t know anything about me.” He couldn’t. She wasn’t using her real name, trying to fly under the radar on this one. She was hoping to avoid Angelique for as long as possible. There were things she couldn’t face yet, her sister being one of them.

“I know you’ve told everyone you’re an archaeologist with an interest in doing a dive out in the sea. That can only mean one thing.”

Curious, she couldn’t help but ask, “And what’s that?”

“You’re looking for Atlantis. More specifically, for the underwater temples.”

“That theory has been scoffed at and disproved a hundred times over.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms. “Which doesn’t mean a damn thing. They’re out there.” He inclined his head to the sea.

“You believe that.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.”

“Who are you?”

“I suppose that might help.” He held out his hand. “Dalton Gabriel.”

She slipped her hand in his. “Isabelle Smith.”

Dalton arched a brow. “Smith? You couldn’t get more inventive than that?”

“I have a passport and all the appropriate papers to back up the name, Mr. Gabriel. All I need from you is a boat. I’ll pay for your time.”

“It’s Dalton. And I’m looking for more than just payment for gasoline and boat rental, Isabelle.”

Wariness mixed with curiosity. “What are you looking for?”

“A partner. I’m interested in finding the temples, too, but I’m no archaeologist.”

“What are you, then?”

“An investor. I have the money. I lack the skills.”

“I see.” Excitement hit her with a sharp punch, fueling her more than the espresso-laden drink in front of her. This could be beneficial to her cause, if she played her cards right and finessed this job. Providing this guy was on the up-and-up. She tried to keep her voice calm and even as she asked, “And what terms are we talking?”

“I’m putting up the money. I’ll front everything you need to do the dig. If we find anything, I’ll arrange for the permits, deal with any hassles the government may place on retrieving the treasure—should you find it—and I’ll ensure that you—and I, of course—get all the credit.”

“Go on.” She tapped her sandal on the cobblestone ground, resisting the urge to leap across the table and kiss him.

“Which means I have the most to risk. I want seventy-five percent of the take.”

Ouch. Then again, right now she had zero. Still, she sensed Dalton had set that percentage as a starting point to bargain. “Fifty-fifty.”

He laughed, the sound dark and rich, like her favorite chocolate. It rolled deeply within her nerve endings. She shook it off. This was business, not playtime.

“I don’t think so, Isabelle. Like I said, I stand to lose much more than you do.”

He had much to learn. She had played this game a very long time, and usually won. “And without me, you will gain nothing. Unless you have other archaeologists at the ready to indulge your fantastic whim that Atlantis truly existed. That there are treasures to be found within the ocean’s depths that for some reason no one else has found before?”

She waited for him to show her his anger, because she knew damn well he had been searching with no luck just like she had. But all he did was lift his gorgeous full lips in a devastating smile.

“Touché, Ms. Smith. Sixty-forty. And believe me, I’ll walk away and find someone else to play with before I take less.”

Something in his voice—a hard edge, perhaps—told her he meant what he said. She knew when to stop and say good enough. “I’ll take it. You have yourself an archaeologist, Dalton.”

“I’ll want to see your so-called credentials before I lay out a penny, Isabelle.”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t expect less. I’ll also want to see your financials, Dalton, to make sure you’re not some crazy kidnapper who’s going to lure me out on his boat, have his way with me, then drown me at sea.”

He laughed out loud. “I think we’re going to be great partners.”

Allowing herself to relax for the first time in days, Isabelle said, “I hope so. We both have a lot at stake here.”

“Where are you staying?”

She was almost embarrassed when she gave him the name of her hotel. It was the most inexpensive—okay, cheapest—one in town, but she was nearly out of money and she had to conserve wherever she could. Dalton had come along at the right time. By tomorrow she’d have been sleeping on the beach, or, God forbid, calling Angelique. Neither option appealed.

“I’ll have my full portfolio sent over this afternoon. Background and financial information, with all the appropriate numbers available to verify anything you need. Look it over thoroughly, and if it meets with your approval, my boat is here.” He took a notebook from his pocket and jotted something down, then tore off the sheet of paper and handed it to her.

She slid the paper into her shorts. “What about my information?”

“Just bring it along with you when you come. It won’t take long to have you checked out once you arrive.”

She nodded and stood, and so did he.

“I’ll see you by tonight, Isabelle.”

“That sure of yourself?”

“Yes.”

She liked his confidence. “Good-bye, Dalton.”

She turned and walked away, hoping this worked. She needed cash, and fast. She needed this find, or at least to find something.

Wasn’t it time for something positive to happen in her life?

Dalton allowed himself a moment to watch Isabelle walk away, admiring the soft sway of her hips.

He had spotted her two days ago, strolling along the boat dock. A diamond in the rough dressed in sand-colored shorts and a thin tank top, her hair pulled back in a dark gold ponytail. He'd paused for a second when he'd seen her, because she looked a lot like Angelique. Isabelle's hair was lighter though, and her body was curvier in certain places. Where Angelique was athletic and slender, Isabelle was more . . . lush.

A rush of heat had hit him instantly. Same thing happened this morning when he sat down across from her at the café and met her curious eyes. His body had gone haywire just looking at her, and he'd felt that same warmth again.

No, that was wrong. It wasn't just warmth. It was an inferno. And she'd seemed completely oblivious to it.

An act? Maybe. Then again, maybe not.

Dalton shook his head at his wayward thoughts. Yeah, like he of all people should be thinking in that direction. But who wouldn't be struck by the beauty of her eyes. A mix of gold and green, swirling, mesmerizing color.

She might be Angelique's twin, but they weren't identical. There were differences between them.

He'd been damn lucky to find her. And when she'd left the boat dock, he'd had a casual conversation with some of the boat owners about what she'd wanted. They'd called her some crazy archaeologist looking to hire a boat.

He knew instinctively what she was after. That's when he'd come up with a plan.

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and pressed a button. Lou answered on the first ring.

"You got that portfolio ready?" Dalton asked.

"I gather she took the bait?"

"Hook, line, and sinker. She wants a boat badly."

“That’s good news. Everything’s in order. All of the records for your fictional corporation, Dalton International, should already be waiting for you on the boat. I had a messenger from the Realm deliver it.”

The Realm of Light, always on the ball as usual. “Thanks.”

“You know what you’re doing, Dalton?”

“I have a pretty good idea. I want to play along with her awhile.”

“Keep her close. We need to see if she has any connection or knowledge of the black diamond or the Sons of Darkness, and if she exhibits any demon behavior. Let me know if you find out anything.”

“What about Angelique?”

“Ryder’s with her. He’s watching over her now.”

“Don’t tell them I’ve found Isabelle. I want to do this on my own for a while, see what kind of situation we have here first before we reunite the sisters.”

Lou was silent for a moment. “Okay. I agree with that. It might work in our favor if Angelique still believes her sister is missing. She might give up the black diamond if she thinks the Realm of Light can help find Isabelle.”

“That’s what I like about you, Lou. You’re devious.”

Lou chuckled. “Not me. I leave that up to all of you.”

“Okay, I’m on it.”

“Work quickly. We don’t have much time.”

“I’ll do that.” Dalton hung up and headed to the boat.

Though that was an understatement. It was nearly as big as a freaking cruise ship, and docked off the harbor. He took the launch off the pier and headed to the yacht, shaking his head as the navigator approached the one-hundred-

sixty-foot beauty. He didn't know how the Realm of Light did it, and had never asked, but whatever any of the demon hunters needed—money, fake identities, props like this ostentatious floating city—one telephone call and within hours it appeared.

He'd been with the Realm for over ten years, and he'd seen money spent like water. They were well funded and he still didn't know where it came from.

He knew this boat cost millions. Everything was polished to perfection, and there were so many rooms on the damn thing he could easily get lost, which meant he had some serious studying to do before Isabelle showed up. He was supposed to own this yacht. He'd better know it backwards and forwards before she got here.

And she *would* come. If the portfolio he'd asked Lou to put together contained everything he wanted it to, she'd come running.

Isabelle needed him, more than she could possibly know. Once in her presence, it hadn't taken him long to read her, to get a sense of what was going on beyond her dire financial situation. There were undercurrents of something that wasn't quite . . . right within her. He didn't know exactly what, but he knew all about things that weren't normal.

After all, he wasn't exactly normal. So he was probably in the best position to figure out who . . . or what . . . Isabelle Deveraux really was.

“Tase, I must speak with you.”

Tase turned and his brother, Aron, took a couple steps back. Tase kept his expression devoid of the smile that wanted to creep out at Aron's obvious displeasure with Tase's heat.

His difference from his brothers had always put him at an advantage—one he never failed to use whenever they were together. It reminded them who was in charge. His heat where the others were cold had always kept him

separate from the other Lords. It was his punishment from their father, this heat he must live with instead of their normal icy cold. He had sinned, had transgressed, and Father had punished him, made him burn for it. Instead of bemoaning his fate, he had used it, benefited from it. Now he led with it. It had made him a leader. Father was proud of him for living with his sin, for using it for his own gain.

“Go ahead,” Tase said.

“One of the new recruits has found Angelique.”

“And?”

“The recruit is injured.”

“I don’t care about that. What of Angelique? Did he bring her back? And the black diamond?”

“She didn’t have it at her home. He worked her mind, saw it was not there.”

“I see. Did she reveal where it was? And what of her sister?”

Aron shook his head. “Unfortunately, there was no time. He was interrupted and injured by a demon hunter and the recruit fled.”

“Fucking hell.” Frustration made the flames lick out around Tase. Aron took a couple more steps back.

“He, like all of them, is new at this; he doesn’t quite have his bearings yet. It will take a while for our new ones to understand.”

“I realize that. Still, we had her in our grasp. Why must I be surrounded by idiots?”

“Yes, this new tactic will require much patience on our part.”

Something Tase had had in short supply, ever since their brothers Bart and Ben had botched everything up, allowing their time in the human realm to

make them grow soft, emotional. The Sons of Darkness had paid a great price for their brothers' sins.

They had lost both Bart and Ben. They had lost their chance at converting Ben's sons Derek and Dominic, half-human and half-demon, who would have made a fine contribution as new members of the Sons of Darkness. Instead, they now fought as demon hunters for the Realm of Light.

What a mess their brothers had made of things.

No more. With Tase at the head of the Lords of the Sons of Darkness now, things would change.

They already had, though not nearly fast enough for him and his remaining brothers.

Catering to humans had been their biggest error.

Using humans—now, that was more like it. Humans could be so easily seduced, their minds and bodies adapted to do the bidding of the dark master. It was only a matter of time, and a bit more experimentation, and there would be many more to fight for the Sons of Darkness. Humans could be given powers to fight, to walk where the Lords could not, to kill, to be the eyes and ears of Tase and his brothers.

And there were so many who wanted what the Sons of Darkness offered. Every day they recruited more.

More to fight against the Realm of Light.

Lou and his demon hunters wouldn't know what hit them.

Tase finally allowed the smile he'd held back.

"You are pleased about something?" Aron asked.

"I'm seeing the future. For the first time in a long while, it looks exceptionally good for all of us, my brother."

CHAPTER FOUR

With Angelique occupied outside by the pool, Ryder made contact with Lou and filled him in on the demon attack on Angelique.

“This wasn’t like any demon I had ever seen before, Lou. It was different.”

“Different how?”

“A few things. First, it said it used to be human.”

“That’s not good,” Lou said.

“I didn’t think so, either.”

“What did it look like?”

“Other than glowing blue eyes, it appeared human. And it didn’t respond to any of the weaponry I used.”

“So you weren’t able to injure it in any way?”

“Well, yeah, actually, my silver knife. I stabbed it. It howled in pain, then disappeared in a puff of smoke.”

Lou paused on the other end of the phone. “Interesting.”

“Which means?”

“My guess is the Sons of Darkness have created a new form of demon. They might be recruiting humans, or kidnapping them and changing them into this new form of hybrid. I’ll have to alert the other Keepers right away.”

“Great.” Just what they needed. As if they didn’t already carry three different types of weaponry to battle these things. Any more firepower added to their arsenal and they’d be so gun-heavy they’d have to go hunting in tanks instead of on foot. “So now what?”

“I’ll get the Realm of Light on developing a new weapon to fight against them. In the meantime, see what you can create there.”

Oh, right. Because he was all about manufacturing weaponry while holed up in a villa in southern Italy. “Yeah. I’ll get right on that.”

He could almost see Lou’s smile on the other end of the phone. “You’re resourceful, Ryder. You’ll figure it out. In the meantime, your job is to protect Angelique. She’s the key to finding the black diamond. Eventually she’s going to have to surrender it, and she’s in danger from the Sons of Darkness until she does.”

“Got it.”

“And I wouldn’t put it past the Sons of Darkness to find you again.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Eventually we’re going to have to move again.”

“Keep me posted,” Lou said.

Ryder hung up and made a circle through the house, searching for anything he could use to make weapons. That was his first priority, because like Lou said, the demons were coming after them. He was certain of it. Running had only bought them a little time. The demons had found Angelique once—they’d do it again.

But next time Ryder would be here. Which wouldn’t do either of them much good without decent weaponry to battle the demons, especially if they sent more of the newly designed ones.

“What are you looking for?”

He stopped and turned, facing Angelique. “Silver.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what hurt the demon who broke in and attacked you.”

“Oh. Okay, then. Let’s go silver hunting.”

She moved around the house, opening closets and drawers, picking up every object and inspecting it carefully, laying the ones in the center of the room that were pure silver.

He liked that she didn’t ask a lot of questions or expect a ton of explanation. And she pitched in right away.

“There’s a locked cellar out back, by the way,” she added, throwing a pitcher into the pile on the floor.

“There is?”

“Yeah. It’s behind all those bushes at the far end of the property. I noticed it when I was wandering around the yard. That’s what I came in to tell you.”

He nodded. “Let’s go check it out.”

Okay, so this wasn’t their house, and he would be destroying someone else’s things, but they had to survive. The Realm of Light would take care of reimbursing the owner for the loss of anything they used, and Ryder and Angelique would be long gone before the missing objects were noticed anyway.

Angelique led him to the cellar, completely unnoticeable unless you were searching for it. Leave it to Angie to unearth it. They cleared the brush and Ryder knelt down to inspect the rather sturdy padlock. Not too sturdy, though, because Ryder had it picked within minutes.

“You’re pretty good at breaking and entering,” Angelique said with a wry grin.

“I’ve had some experience getting into places.”

“I’ll just bet you have.”

He discarded the lock and pulled the lid off, wrinkling his nose at the musty smell that wafted up at them from down below.

He turned on his flashlight and led the way down the thick stone steps. “Be careful.”

It was much cooler down here, and roomier than Ryder would have thought at first glance.

“Oooh, antiques!” Angelique said, her voice tinged with excitement. She hurried past him and knelt on the ground, inspecting what looked to be old pottery stacked up and wrapped in nearly transparent, yellowed linen.

Ryder zeroed in on the table at the back of the cellar. Just what he needed. Old swords and daggers, sheathed in ancient scabbards and leather holders.

“Let me see those,” Angie said, coming up next to him.

He handed one to her and she carefully pulled a sword from its scabbard. She held it in her hands like a woman would a newborn. Lovingly, gingerly, and with tender care. Then she put it down, her eyes lit up, and she sifted through the others.

“These are phenomenal. Cutlass, rapiers, daggers, even battle-axes. Some newer, some as old as medieval times.”

Angelique gazed in lust at the objects in front of her. Ryder laughed. “Gives you a thrill, huh?”

She didn’t turn from the weaponry in front of her. “You have no idea. These must be worth a fortune. I wonder if the current owner of this property is even aware of the treasures in here. Who would leave this stuff locked up in a cellar? They belong in a museum.”

“Not sure. Either way, they’re ours now. Gather these up.”

She finally swiveled and faced him. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to use these weapons. Now help me carry them out of here.”

“Ryder, these are antiques.”

“No, they’re weapons.” He scooped up an armful and waited for Angelique.

“We can’t take them.”

Ignoring her, he pivoted and walked out of the cellar, knowing she’d follow. He made his way back into the house and laid his stash on the kitchen table. Angelique put those she had carried alongside the ones he’d brought.

“I don’t like this,” she said.

“Duly noted. Now I need a blowtorch.”

Angelique whimpered.

He smiled at her misery as he walked out of the house and down the stone walkway. He didn’t think he’d be lucky enough to find a torch in this place, but he figured it wouldn’t hurt to search the garage anyway.

Damned if the owner didn’t have a blowtorch in the garage. Actually, the garage was fairly well stocked with tools.

“It’s got to be my lucky day.” Not much had gone right the past few months. It was good that at least something had. They’d found plenty of silver, and now he had a torch hot enough to melt it down.

He grabbed all the silver and brought it to the garage, then found a pot sturdy enough to hold it all and set to work.

It was a tedious, painstaking task that took the better part of the day. And Angelique stayed right there with him, her goggles on to protect her eyes from the blinding light of the torch. He burned, she watched. And brought him drinks and food during breaks. She was silent the entire time, though from the sour expression on her face he was more than aware of her displeasure at what he was doing.

It wasn't like he was melting down any of the antique weapons they'd found in the shed. Those he'd use later, after the silver was liquefied.

By the time he was finished, it was dark outside, and he was filthy.

"I'm going to go take a shower and let this cool down a bit. Then it's part two."

"Delightful," Angelique said, wrinkling her nose.

He shook his head at her continued disgust with the process, and headed into the house to clean up. She followed.

"What, exactly, do you plan to do now that you've melted all that precious silver that didn't belong to you?" she said, following him up to the bathroom.

He stripped off his boots and socks. "I'm going to coat all the weapons in the melted silver to use against the demons."

"I see. So you'll be ruining all the antiques, too."

He dragged his shirt over his head and discarded it on the floor. "Yes, as a matter of fact I will be."

"I really hate this, Ryder."

"So you've mentioned." He leaned in and turned the shower on, then flipped the button on his pants and dragged the zipper down.

Angelique's gaze followed.

"You gonna hang in here and continue to argue with me?"

"I might."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." The pants dropped to the floor and he turned and stepped into the shower. "But if you're going to bitch, talk loud. Otherwise I won't be able to hear you over the water."

“Damn you, Ryder.”

He heard the door close and grinned, then reached for the soap.

The man had the body of a god. Breathtakingly stunning. Muscles ran in ripples down his abdomen, his arms lined with clearly defined ridges. His thighs were like stout tree trunks, and she’d gone utterly female when he’d dropped his pants.

She’d completely lost her train of thought while he’d stood there, briefly and gloriously stark naked, before he turned and stepped into the shower.

She might as well have drooled while she was at it.

By the time she recovered her senses, it was too late to continue the argument.

Ryder was the most stubborn, infuriating man she’d ever known. And clearly, he had no idea what she did for a living. Or at least he didn’t care.

Angelique stared at the closed bathroom door and listened to the shower running, trying not to remember the sight of Ryder’s naked body. Though she doubted she’d ever forget. She sucked in a breath, blew it out with force, and contemplated opening the door to continue their discussion.

To what end? It wouldn’t get her anywhere. She knew what he was doing. And really, what choice did he have? It wasn’t like he was going to ruin the antiques out of spite. It was necessary for their survival—for her protection.

Still, it didn’t mean she had to like it.

Frustration was pointless. She decided to go downstairs to cook dinner and take her anxiety out on raw vegetables. It felt good to attack something with a knife.

And the vegetables didn’t talk back or argue with her. By the time she’d cut up carrots, zucchini, and squash, she felt immensely better.

“You’re dangerous wielding that knife.”

“You have no idea.” She didn’t turn or glance Ryder’s way. It was bad enough to be able to smell his clean scent. And her head was still filled with visuals of what he looked like without clothes. He had a mighty fine ass, too.

Irritated by her wayward thoughts, she scooped up the vegetables and tossed them into the pot, then shoved a plate at him.

“There’s a grill out back. Cook these steaks.”

He grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

After Ryder left, she concentrated on food instead of the effect his nearness had on her. Now that she had her wits about her again and had recovered from the attack by the demon, she was all too aware of how Ryder made her feel.

Frustrated, angry, irritated, turned on, curious, excited, flushed with heat, and filled with need. Mixed emotions for sure, none of which should be front and center in her mind. Finding her sister and staying one step ahead of the Sons of Darkness were her priorities.

She just had to figure out a way to accomplish both.

And maybe Ryder could help.

She opened a bottle of wine, deciding tonight they were going to talk, lay everything out on the table and see where they stood.

It was time for honesty, on both sides.

Which should make for an interesting evening.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heart pounding in excitement, Isabelle tried for nonchalance, but failed. She couldn't help but gape as the launch took her out to Dalton's yacht.

It was shiny, sleek, and beautiful, and she couldn't wait to climb on board. She had a feeling her entire life was about to change.

She'd gotten his portfolio, read it through, and made a few phone calls for verification. It hadn't taken her long after that to pack up her things and check out of the cheap hotel room. She'd practically sprinted down to the dock.

Okay, so she'd taken a shower first, changed clothes and made sure she looked decent. After all, she had a benefactor to impress. A stinking rich benefactor. If she played her cards right, all her dreams might soon come true.

The launch came up next to the yacht and she was helped aboard by a crew member who held out his hand and assisted her up the ladder.

Wow. Polished, gleaming deck, cushioned seating and lounge chairs, a bar, even a hot tub. Fancy stuff. Amazing the things money could buy.

"Mr. Gabriel will be right with you, ma'am. I'll take your luggage to one of the cabins below," the deckhand said with a short nod of his head.

"Thank you."

She wandered around, running her hand over the railing and staring out to sea. Calm, blue waters, and underneath was the possibility of a lifetime. Butterflies flitted in her stomach, anticipation driving away the hurt and anger she'd carried with her these past few months.

Don't think about it. Do your job and just forget.

A soft breeze blew strands of hair against her cheek. She tucked them behind her ear, enjoying the warm afternoon sun against her face. This was so peaceful, the rocking motion of the boat lulling her into a sense of security she hadn't felt in far too long.

She needed good things to happen in her life. A dark cloud had been hanging over her head, and she was determined to blow it away.

Success could provide the hard wind she needed to obliterate that cloud. And money could supply a lot of amnesia. Then she could forget the bad things.

"Welcome aboard."

She turned at the sound of Dalton's voice, once again struck by an instantaneous attraction to him. More than just his appearance, though that part of him was mighty fine. White linen pants, blue button-down silk shirt, they both looked great against his dark tan. But it was more than appearance. There was the sexiness of his voice, the slow and easy way he walked toward her, the way he smiled as if he was genuinely happy to see her. What woman wouldn't be affected by all that in one delectable package?

He held out his hand and she slid hers against his palm, then fought a shudder.

A zap of electricity, a sudden rush of heat.

Wow. Now that was chemistry. But it was more than that. Something behind his eyes, an awareness, as if she knew him . . . really knew him. An instant comfort. She rarely felt that with men. Men always made her uncomfortable. She used them, definitely, but she was never at ease with them.

Dalton felt . . . easy.

“Thank you for agreeing to provide the funding for this venture,” she said.

“I’m glad my portfolio met with your approval.”

She snorted, then clamped her lips together, unable to believe she’d done that. “Sorry. It’s just that . . . who wouldn’t find your portfolio acceptable? You are a billionaire, after all.”

He smiled, seemingly not insulted. “I guess you have a point. Should I feel used?”

“Probably.”

Now it was his turn to snort. “I like an honest woman. How about a drink?”

Honest? Now that was a quality she’d never attributed to herself, but Dalton didn’t have to know that. “I’d love one.”

He motioned to a table under a shaded overhang. “Bloody Marys, Dimitri. Doubles.”

When he slid into the chair next to hers, she said, “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“No. I just like a strong cocktail. I can make yours a single if you’d like.”

She shook her head. “Not necessary. I can handle my alcohol.”

“Good.” He swirled the celery around the dark red liquid, then lifted the glass to his lips and took a long swallow. Something about that action really hit her hot buttons. The color of the drink was compelling. She took a drink out of her own glass, enjoying the hot, spicy flavor.

“It’s really good.”

He nodded. “Dimitri is a great bartender.”

“So is this what you do with all your time? Sail around on your yacht?”

“Not exactly. I have many business interests that take me around the world.”

“Such as?”

“Financial interests. Investments. But my companies run well on their own and I can afford the best people. That leaves much of my time open for personal pursuits.”

“Again, such as?”

“Boating, obviously. Diving, of course. The acquisition of antiquities. Hunting.”

“Really? What do you hunt?”

He looked down and smiled into his glass. “Large game.”

“Sounds interesting, and dangerous.”

He looked up at her, his expression serious. “It can be deadly.”

Somehow she got the idea he was talking about something other than deer hunting. She’d like to know more.

But it wasn’t her business to know more about Dalton. All she had to do was use his boat and his money.

“Must be nice to be able to do whatever you want.”

“It is. Maybe if you find Atlantis, you’ll be in the same position.”

She clasped both hands around the chilled glass. “It’s a dream of mine to be that successful.”

“It means that much to you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Freedom. Prestige. The ability to hunt for treasure without worrying about how to fund it. Obviously you’ve never had to worry about money, so you don’t understand what it’s like not to have it.”

“You grew up poor?”

She shrugged. “Not exactly poor, but not rolling in the dough, either.”

“I couldn’t find any information on one Isabelle Smith, archaeologist. So maybe you should tell me about yourself.”

She figured he’d check her background, even wondered if he’d accept this venture without knowing much about her. “My mother was an archaeologist. I learned everything I know from her.”

“Was? Is she retired?”

“Dead.”

He reached across the table and laid his hand over hers. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. She became ill suddenly and passed away.”

“Any siblings?”

She paused for a second, remembering the practiced speech. “None. My father died before I was born, so it was always just my mom and me. When my mother died, I inherited the family business, so to speak. Now I’m all alone.”

Dalton stared at Isabelle, trying to mask his disbelief. She’d just lied to him about having no other family. First using a fake last name, then denying that she had a sister.

“It must be tough to do this by yourself, with no support. No husband or boyfriend, I assume?”

Her lips lifted. “No. I don’t have time for that.”

“Everyone has time for that.”

Dimitri set plates of food down in front of them.

“Fresh seafood and pasta? How did you know those were my favorites?”

“They’re my favorites,” he said, picking up his fork.

He watched her eat. She wasn’t tentative, digging into her food with gusto. Good girl. A woman on the hunt needed energy, and he was glad she wasn’t hesitant about eating in front of him.

Her appetite extended beyond food, too. She had a hunger for knowledge and discovery that intrigued him. She didn’t seem shy, and she liked to talk. At least about archaeology. Throughout dinner she discussed her work at length, especially her research into the possibility of the existence of underwater temples in the sea, and what it could mean to find them. He sensed true enthusiasm in her words, though he wondered about her motivation.

He pushed his plate away and took a swallow of the Chardonnay Dimitri had provided during their meal. “And what will you do with your find should you, in fact, discover the underwater temples?”

Isabelle leaned back and picked up her wineglass, swirling the liquid around. “I’ll be famous.”

“And wealthy beyond your imaginings.”

“Yes.”

“Does that excite you?”

She looked up from the liquid in her glass and stared directly at him. “Yes. Does that make me shallow?”

He shrugged. “Most people are motivated by monetary gain. Who wouldn’t want to be rich?” He looked around him. “It buys a lot.”

She grinned. “Does it buy happiness, as people often say?”

“Are you needing to buy some happiness, Isabelle?”

Her smile died. “Are you also a psychologist, Dalton?”

“Hardly. I just know what money can and can’t buy.”

“Easily stated from one who already has it. Should I feel sorry for the misunderstood billionaire now?”

He snorted. “I hardly think so. Should I feel sorry for the penniless archaeologist?”

She tilted her glass in his direction. “Touché.”

“Be careful what you wish for. You might just get it.”

“And some things we get that we would have never asked for.”

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

“You won’t find a mystery where I’m concerned, Dalton. What you see is what you get, and I’m perfectly satisfied with my life.”

“Are you?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m doing exactly what I want to do. And if I get rich doing it, even better. If I don’t, it’s nothing I’m not already used to. It’s always about the adventure. The prize is simply a bonus at the end.” She pushed back from the table. “I’d love a tour of the yacht.”

He stood, realizing that was all he was going to get from her, at least for now, which left him with more questions than answers. But he knew better than to push. “I’d be happy to show you around.”

The yacht was multilevel. The top deck contained his suite with a private office, as well as a VIP suite where he’d had Isabelle’s things taken. He liked that their rooms were adjoining. It would give him an opportunity to lurk nearby, see if she made any calls or contact with anyone else.

Their cabins were obscenely spacious, with king-size beds, plasma TV’s, Jacuzzi tubs, and marble vanities.

“Wow. I can’t believe how big these rooms are,” Isabelle said when he showed her to her room.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable in here.”

“Fifteen people would be comfortable in here.”

He laughed. “Come on. I’ll show you below.”

Belowdecks were the hands’ quarters, the galley, and the engine room, as well as storage and equipment. All the action was on the top deck, but he wanted Isabelle to know where everything was located so she’d feel comfortable, like a partner in this venture.

He wanted her to trust him.

They moved back to the top deck, and Dalton led her to her room. “I’ll give you some time to unpack. Maybe we can meet for a drink later and go over the plan for tomorrow morning? I’d like to get an early start on the dive.”

“Sure. I’ll see you in a bit.”

She stepped inside and closed the door. Dalton went to his room and moved to the monitor, hesitating for a second. He was no voyeur, but he had to keep tabs on Isabelle’s activities. Setting up her room with audio and video surveillance didn’t sit well with him, but he’d had no choice. If she made

contact with anyone, if she exhibited any signs of demon behavior, he had to know. Which meant he had to watch.

She didn't unpack right away, just wandered around the room, touching things. Rather lovingly, as a matter of fact, using just her fingertips. She traced each piece of furniture, each surface of the room, as if she were in awe of every object. Then she went to the French doors and opened them, breathing in the sea air. She leaned against the door and stared out to sea for about five minutes, not moving at all.

Dalton stopped breathing, mesmerized by the picture she presented. He zoomed in on her, unable to resist seeing her up close.

Maybe he was a voyeur after all.

The setting sun bathed her face, casting her features in a dusky orange glow. Her hair was down, cascading in soft waves over her bare shoulders. Her skin looked like luminescent pearls, making him want to reach out and smooth his hand down the curve of her arm.

When she breathed deeply, her breasts pressed against the fabric of her dress, outlining their fullness. He flexed his fingers, wanting to touch, to slide his thumb over her nipples, then reach for the straps at her shoulders and draw them down to bare her.

His cock tightened, and he closed his eyes, visualizing himself stepping into the room, into the doorway before her. He'd brush her hair away from her shoulder, press his lips there, then straighten and meet her gaze.

She'd nod, and he'd lean in, bracing his hand against the doorway next to her head. Her lips would part, an invitation to take what she offered.

And he wanted. Oh, how he wanted . . .

He pushed back, stunned at the trail of his thoughts.

He didn't think about women. He thought about work. Always about his job. He was a demon hunter, and that was his life, his reason for existence.

He wasn't gifted with a normal life, a chance for relationships . . . for love. That was for others, not for him.

He'd led an angelic life, a perfect existence. But he'd made one really bad mistake, and his penance had led him to find Lou and the Realm of Light. He'd done the only thing he could do—dedicated his life to fighting the Sons of Darkness and the demons under their control. Maybe someday he'd find forgiveness, get a second chance.

He knew better. He was never again going to be what he once was. And always, always, the darkness would live inside him.

Darkness and light, at war within. He looked at Isabelle, and sensed the same thing. Is that why he was so drawn to her, why he'd felt that instant rush when they touched?

He stood, dragging a hand through his hair, trying to shake off the effects of his daydream. He stared at the monitor. Isabelle was still framed there, staring off to sea.

Goddamn, he wanted.

No.

He knew why he was here. And it had never bothered him before. So what was it about Isabelle that struck him, made his gut tighten in unfamiliar ways?

He shook his head and forced himself to focus, leaning toward the monitor again. Isabelle pushed off from the doorway and moved to her luggage, finally unpacking her clothes and putting them away. She had another suitcase with a laptop, some loose papers, a binder, and a small box.

The box caught his eye right away, because it was padlocked. She picked it up, looked at it for a few minutes, then sat on the bed with it still in her hands.

“What have you got in there, Isabelle?” he whispered. “Show me.”

As if in response to his plea, she fished into her pocket and pulled out a key, unlocking the box.

Inside was a book. Isabelle put the box to the side and opened the book, reverently turning pages until she found a section, reading, then lingering on that page. She caressed the yellowed pages, moving her hands over them with such love and tenderness, Dalton could feel it.

Too bad this video equipment didn't have a feature allowing him to pan in close enough to read what was written in that book.

So far she hadn't said a word, just continued to read. The strange thing was, she wasn't turning pages. Whatever interested her was on a single page.

But then she sniffed. Again. And wiped her hand across her face.

She was crying.

What the hell was she reading that would move her to tears?

She tilted her head back, scrunched her face into a frown, then opened her eyes, letting him see that it wasn't grief that had made her cry.

It was pure and utter fury.

"Damn you, Mother!"

She threw the book across the room. It hit the wall with a hard thunk. Isabelle stared at it for a few seconds, then headed into the bathroom.

Dalton sat back, stunned.

What the hell was in that book?

CHAPTER SIX

Ryder hid his amusement throughout dinner and the several bottles of wine Angelique had coaxed him into drinking.

He had an uncanny tolerance for alcohol. It didn't affect him. She didn't know that, of course, and he didn't share the information, especially since it was obvious she was trying to get him drunk.

For what reason, though? He didn't suppose it was so she could have her way with him.

The mental visual made him tighten. Her on top, him buried to the hilt inside her, holding on to her hips as she rocked against him.

Shit. Where was he going with this train of thought besides nowhere? He tried not to think of Angie in a sexual way, though it was damn hard not to, especially since the two of them were alone.

Think demons. Not sex.

Yeah, right. With his dick in charge, demons weren't going to be high on the list. Especially when a sweet-smelling, beautiful woman was plying him with liquor.

A woman who wanted something.

She'd even been nice.

He preferred the contentious Angie over this stranger who'd smiled benignly through dinner, making innocuous conversation. The game had been fun for a while. He'd listened to her chatter on and on about everything and nothing, but after a couple hours and a lot of wine, they'd

gotten nowhere. He thought maybe if she had more to drink, she'd start talking.

She hadn't. Not about a worthwhile topic, anyway. And he'd just about reached his tolerance level of bullshit.

"And so when I did two years in the Mojave, it was really hard to leave . . ."

She continued to drone on about digs she'd been on, discoveries she'd made, museums she'd donated her finds to. Things he already knew about from the background research he'd done on her. He probably knew more about her than she did.

And all the while she talked, they drank. And she kept refilling both their glasses.

He noticed she hadn't yet started slurring her words. Maybe she was an adrenaline junkie and the high levels of it in her bloodstream burned off the alcohol.

"There was this statue we uncovered once in Egypt—"

"Angie."

"Yes?"

"What exactly is your point?"

She tilted her head. "Of my story?"

"No, of tonight. Of this. The four bottles of wine and inane conversation."

Frowning. "You find my conversation inane?"

"Yes."

She sat back. "Well. That's rather insulting."

"You're not at all offended. You have an agenda. What is it?"

“I do not.”

“Yeah, you do. You’re trying to get me drunk.”

She sniffed. “I would do no such thing.”

“For the record, I don’t get drunk. Ever. The wine was great, though I prefer an ice cold beer or hard whiskey, straight up.”

“Oh. I’m sure I saw a bottle of—”

“Don’t bother. I’ve had enough.”

“Fine, then.” She stood, but he grasped her wrist, tugging her back to the sofa.

“Not of talking. I’ve had enough to drink. You wanna talk, we’ll talk. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

She leaned back, picked at one of her fingernails. “I just thought we’d been running on edge since we met up again and it was time to unwind a little.”

“I don’t unwind, either.”

She looked up. “Ever?”

“Ever. I’m on a mission. It’s not in your best interests for me to be too relaxed.”

“We had some downtime together in the cave in Australia, if you recall.”

“That wasn’t exactly downtime. We were trapped, and I was plotting our rescue the entire time.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right. We talked. And you kissed me.”

She just had to bring that up again. He’d tried like hell to forget that moment when she’d teased him and he took the bait. But the taste of her mouth still lingered in his memory. He wasn’t likely to ever forget it. Just as

he wouldn't forget her betrayal. "A lot of things happened in Australia. Do you really want to dredge all that up?"

She shrugged. "I have nothing to hide."

"Good. Then tell me where the black diamond is."

"Except that."

"Then we really don't have anything to talk about."

He stood, but this time she grabbed his arm.

"Wait."

He looked down at her. "I'm not in the mood to play games, Angie."

"I'm sorry. Sit down. I really do want to talk."

He sat. "If you wanted to discuss something, all you had to do was say so. You didn't have to ply me with alcohol."

"Right. Because you're usually so open and talkative."

He tilted his head. "You're a real smart-ass, you know that?"

She looked away, but her lips curled. "You like me that way."

She was right. He did prefer her this way to the sweet, accommodating woman she'd been earlier tonight. That Angelique had been alien to him. He liked her with a little sass. Maybe he could handle her better when she showed him some attitude.

"So what's on your mind?"

"I'm worried."

"About?"

“A lot of things. About what happened at the cottage. How that demon knew where to find me. And if they found me, they can find Isabelle.”

“Are you thinking something’s happened to her?”

“I’m trying *not* to think that, actually. But there has to be a good reason she has suddenly gone under the radar. And yes, she makes me nuts, but right now I need to know where she is.”

“Why now?”

“Because of what Bart said at the caves in Australia.”

“You’re wondering if your sister has some connection to the Sons of Darkness?”

She nodded, misery in her expression. “It wasn’t me. When I touched the black diamond, the light inside it extinguished. Then Bart said I wasn’t the one, almost as if he expected me to have some kind of magical power, as if he already knew I would.”

“That doesn’t mean Isabelle will, either.”

“True. But putting two and two together, Izzy and I are twins. What did the Sons of Darkness know about me, about us, that I’m unaware of?”

“Good question. Are you sure you don’t know anything?”

She narrowed her gaze in anger. “Please. Do you think I’d be a sitting duck if I was on the demons’ side? That that thing would have held my throat, demanding answers? I don’t know anything. I didn’t at the caves and I still don’t.”

Ryder didn’t know what to think. Demons liked to play games, and subterfuge was one of their favorites. Often what you saw wasn’t what you got. He wouldn’t put it past them to plant one of their own in the midst of the Realm of Light.

But gut instinct told him that wasn't what was going on here, that Angie wasn't involved with the demons. Not directly, anyway.

"I'm afraid Isabelle is the Queen of Darkness that Bart spoke about."

Well, hit him over the head with a sledgehammer. Now they were getting somewhere. "Why would you think that?"

She leaned over, balancing her elbows on her knees and clasping her hands together, studying them, he supposed, so she wouldn't have to meet his gaze. "Several reasons, actually. Because of Bart's confusion about me and the black diamond, and because of Izzy's behavior. It . . . fits."

"What do you mean, it fits?"

Her head shot up and her tortured eyes met his. "There's a darkness in her. I've always known about it. She can be sweetness and light one minute, and turn on you the next. And when she does, she almost seems to enjoy it. I could understand it if it had just happened when we were kids, but it's continued even into adulthood. It's like she gets a perverse pleasure out of hurting people, especially me."

"Sibling rivalry?"

Angie shook her head. "No. It's much more than that. I can't really explain it, Ryder. There's a deviousness to her, an inherent . . . evil. I can feel it. Sometimes she scares the hell out of me. And the older she gets, the more pronounced it's gotten."

"What kind of darkness?"

Angelique shrugged. "Her behavior. Her lack of scruples. She'll hurt people without a second thought, with no remorse. She'll take and take for her own gain without thinking of the repercussions."

"She definitely sounds greedy."

Angelique nodded. "Yes, but it goes beyond that. She wants to beat me, to stay a step ahead of me. It's always been that way. She'd steal a treasure

right out from under me if it meant she could win.”

“That still sounds more like sibling rivalry.”

She shook her head. “I used to think so, but she’s a successful archaeologist in her own right. She doesn’t need to be better than me. She’s already brilliant at what she does. She has this drive to be rich, famous, as if she wants everything. There’s nothing she won’t do to get what she wants. There’s no one she won’t destroy who stands in her way. She never gets close to people, never lets anyone in. She and I have a bond, but we’re sisters. And even then, she can be cold with me.

“I’ve always felt there was something different about her, but I denied it for so long. Until Australia. Then it hit me that she could have evil in her. But how? We’re twins, and I’m . . . I’m not like that, Ryder.”

Ah, hell. The pain on her face was so intense it made his stomach hurt. He wanted to drop to his knees and gather her in his arms. Goddamn. He wanted to soothe her.

That so wasn’t his thing. Talking was better. Touching wasn’t a good idea. And he wasn’t a soother.

“We all have a dark side, Angie. It’s what we choose to do with it that makes us who we are.”

The look she gave him was so filled with question and need that he could feel it deep inside. It made him crave things he hadn’t craved in a very long time.

“What do you mean by that?”

He should learn to keep his damn mouth shut, before he started spilling his guts to her. “Nothing. Some philosophical bullshit I read once. I thought it might help. Did it?”

She let out a soft laugh. “A little.”

He stood and walked to the window, looking out over the moonless night, wondering what he was doing in here with Angie when he should be outside.

Or maybe he just felt the need to escape, to gather some distance between them, before he did something really stupid, like try to comfort her. “I’d better get outside and patrol.” He turned back to her. “Look. We’ll find your sister and when we do, you’ll discover that she’s just fine. Quit worrying.”

“I’ll try.”

He slipped out the back door and shut it, filling his lungs with a deep breath of humid night air. The choking sweet smell of gardenias was making him sick, so he moved away from the house, keeping his focus on the surrounding terrain, searching for the signs of anything suspicious.

The night was dead quiet. Not even a ruffle of wind to shatter the silence.

It wasn’t quiet in his head, though. He took a quick glance to the house, spotting Angie through the kitchen window. She was doing dishes, a frown of deep concentration lining her forehead.

He hadn’t given her the answers she’d needed. Not that he’d had them, but he knew he’d walked out on her in the middle of a really important conversation. One she’d wanted to delve deeper into.

One he couldn’t handle. Because she’d started talking about bloodline, and darkness.

And that was a little too close to home for him. His own potential for violence, where it had come from, was a topic he didn’t discuss.

The strange thing was, he’d wanted to. Tonight, with Angie, as soon as she’d expressed concerns about Isabelle, he’d wanted to tell her about his own dark side.

Wouldn’t she have loved to hear some of those stories?

He shook his head. She'd wanted tenderness and understanding, not someone who would tell her that her sister probably was evil, that sometimes you couldn't hide the darkness inside yourself.

Some were successful, some weren't.

And some walked a tightrope, striking a careful balance, knowing that at any second they could fall.

Ryder walked the tightrope every damn day. He couldn't offer Angie any sympathy because it wasn't in his nature to give it. Maybe he really was just like his dad.

The light went out in the kitchen. He turned away from the window and stared out into the night, letting the darkness envelop him, breathing out a sigh when he heard her footsteps approaching.

"Go inside, Angie."

She sat next to him, her thigh brushing his. "We almost got somewhere tonight. You pulled back."

"We didn't get anywhere. I can't give you what you need."

"Because you don't trust me."

"Partly."

"Because you think I don't trust you?"

He turned to her. "What?"

"I revealed something to you tonight. A fear about my sister. Doesn't that speak of trust?"

He was glad it was dark. The way she looked at him . . . he could get so lost in her eyes. He didn't want to. It made him feel weak and out of control.

“I’d trust you more if you told me where the black diamond was.” Keep it about business. That, he could control.

“I do trust you. As much as I can trust anyone. But my sister’s life is at stake here.”

“Then prove it.” This could be over quickly if she’d just tell him where the black diamond was.

“Ryder.” She leaned in, her breasts pressing against his arm, shocking the hell out of him by nearly climbing into his lap as her lips found his.

Maybe it was surprise that kept him immobile. He should have moved away. But hell, she offered. He took. Her mouth was spicy, hot and inviting. And he wanted in.

With a groan, he dragged her onto his lap and she tangled her fingers into his hair, deepening the kiss. He liked that, liked feeling her touch on him. Her body was soft against everything that was hard about him. And everything about him was damn hard right now. Instant rushes of heat and raw, steely power ignited a fuse that had laid dormant too long. One touch of her lips and he was on fire.

The part of him that knew this was a really bad idea disappeared, vanishing along with his reserves about keeping a professional distance. All he could think about now was getting her naked, touching the silk of her body, tasting her all over. Sinking into her and forgetting the darkness around them both.

Her lips were full, her tongue moist and searching as she entered his mouth, licking against his. She wanted more, and he wanted to give it to her.

But he also remembered trust. And darkness. And violence. And what could happen when you loved someone.

He grasped her arms and with a gentle tug, pushed her away.

She tilted her head, her eyes glazed with passion. A quick glance down her body showed tight, pointed nipples against her thin shirt. He wanted to touch, to taste, to take her over and over again.

Possession. He could feel it boiling up inside him, that overwhelming need to brand her and make her his. The need was almost violent.

Yeah, that had worked so well for his parents, hadn't it?

He swallowed, his throat dry, his body taut with need. He couldn't believe what he was about to do.

"Go back inside, Angie."

She inhaled, then blew it out, nodding, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. She slid off his lap and without a word, turned away and walked toward the house.

He watched every step, the way her hips swayed, the way she held her head up high. She didn't turn back to look at him as she opened the door and closed it behind her.

No, it wasn't that he didn't trust her.

He didn't trust himself.

He knew exactly where the darkness lived. It lived inside him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Out on the crystal clear waters of the Mediterranean, Isabelle could almost believe it was all hers. The yacht, the crew, the expensive diving equipment—all of it.

Someday, it would be. As soon as she found the underwater temples and made her fortune, she'd never have to rely on anyone else for assistance again.

Not even her sister. Then she could do it alone.

And maybe she should be alone.

“You’re deep in thought.”

She turned at the sound of Dalton’s voice, plastering on a bright smile. “I’m excited about the dive this morning. Just planning my strategy.”

“More likely planning how you’re going to spend that fortune you think you’re going to make when you find the temple.”

She laughed at the way he seemed to read her thoughts. She liked his honesty, and the fact he didn’t hold her treasure hunting against her, like Angelique always did. With Angie, she always felt like she should apologize for wanting. With Dalton, he seemed to enjoy her enthusiasm, her need for adventure, her honesty about wanting to find success.

Of course, she was lying to Dalton, but she was as honest with him as she could be. And she was relaxed with him, more so than she had been with anyone in a very long time.

“I don’t think I’m going to find the treasure. I know.”

“I like a self-confident woman.”

Just as she appreciated a gorgeous, rich man. “Are you diving with me today?” she asked, noticing he was wearing a wet suit. One that clung tight to his well-muscled body.

“Of course. I have to keep an eye on my investment, don’t I?”

“Bull. You’re diving for the adventure. You’re as interested in finding the temples as I am.”

He arched a brow. “I’ll have to make more of an attempt at being mysterious.”

She snorted, then turned to the railing, her nerves tingling as the yacht cut through the glassy water on its way to the designated location. When she felt the engine slow, she nearly jumped overboard in excitement, but maintained her outward composure. It wouldn’t do at all for Dalton to see her come undone. She was supposed to be a pro at this. But inside she bubbled over with a childlike thrill. This was her moment.

To calm herself down, she concentrated on inventorying everything for the dive. She focused on the tools, cameras, and equipment they’d be taking down with them.

Dalton was adept at ordering his crew. They moved like a well-oiled machine, lowering everything into the water.

Someday she’d be at the helm of her own crew, barking out orders. And they’d all jump.

She’d be their queen. They’d bow before her.

A thin veil of darkness covered her mind. She grasped the railing as a wave of dizziness overcame her.

Darkness. Queen. Minions bowing before her. Gruesome creatures, but they revered her. Sickening evil surged inside her. Everything was at her command. Wealth, immense power. She could control it all.

She blinked, biting back the bile rising in her throat.

Those weird visions again. That sense of evil, coating her like a splash of thick oil. She shuddered, shook it off.

Too much stress. Not enough sleep lately. She really needed to find this treasure so she could relax. She was starting to lose it.

It had nothing to do with the journal. Nothing at all to do with her mother's words. She was imagining things.

Turning away from the railing, she focused on the tasks of getting ready for the dive. Soon, all was ready. She put on her tank and mask and lowered herself off the edge of the swim dock. Dalton followed, and they submerged, the crew following with the equipment.

Isabelle hadn't done a huge amount of undersea exploration, but enough to be comfortable. And she'd always loved diving, had been enamored of the sea since she was a little girl, awestruck by the quiet solitude of blue water surrounding her.

No one had searched this particular area, concentrating instead at points northeast of their location. But she'd studied the area, the charts, the estimates, and knew where she wanted to start.

Call it a hunch, or whatever, but she'd been researching this for years. Others scoffed at her, but she'd done her homework. Anyway, that's why she liked to work alone. She didn't need the disdain of the scholarly types. This time she was going to find the temples. She was going to find Atlantis.

She knew this was her last chance.

Dalton stayed a bit behind Isabelle, content for now to observe her movements. She undulated through the water at a leisurely pace, her braided hair flowing behind her.

She looked like a mermaid, her body sleek and perfect as she glided effortlessly around coral and plant life. She seemed oblivious to the rest of them, at ease with leading the pack where she wanted to go. And she seemed to know exactly where she was headed. Her plastic map tied with cord to her wrist, she paused only occasionally to take a quick glance at the landmarks on it, then proceed.

It was so dark they had to rely on lights to see. Isabelle dove low, skirting the sea floor but not disturbing the sandy bottom. Finally, she halted to inspect a large, odd-shaped boulder, then motioned for Dalton, who swam up beside her. She pointed to the boulder and quickly jotted something down on the waterproof whiteboard attached to her wrist.

Boulder similar to other finds was all she wrote. He nodded and motioned to one of the crew members, who took pictures of all sides of the boulder and marked the location with a balloon buoy. They moved on.

They spent the entire day on the dive. They surfaced, ate lunch, changed air tanks and went down again. It was tedious, painstaking work, but Isabelle was relentless, covering every inch of the sea floor and missing nothing. She noted every object that could be related to the temples and never seemed to tire in her quest. By the time the sun started to set and they had to stop, Dalton was exhausted and waterlogged, and Isabelle was clearly frustrated. They climbed aboard and rid themselves of their diving gear.

“How about a shower and change of clothes? I’ll get the cook started on dinner and we can relax,” Dalton suggested.

“Fine,” she said, not even looking at him. Her lips compressed in a tight line as she marched off to her room.

Dalton followed, smiling as he made his way to his room, stripped off his wet suit, and climbed into the shower to wash away the salt water. The day was a waste. He’d gotten nowhere, other than furthering Isabelle’s treasure-hunting goal. She’d exhibited no signs of demonic behavior, though by the time they’d surfaced at the end of the day, she seemed about ready to throw a major tantrum.

That was frustration, and understandable. The woman worked hard. And he was impressed. He didn't really know what he expected from Isabelle, but it wasn't what she'd shown him today.

Maybe he'd expected her to be lazy, to let others do the work while she stood on the sidelines. The intel he'd gathered on her indicated she was into hunting treasure and getting rich quick, concentrating on digs that generated fast results and a big prize, then hurrying on to the next one.

That didn't seem like her at all, at least not that he'd seen today. She'd exhibited the traits of a born leader—tenacious, determined, and driven, and seemingly willing to stick it out until she got what she wanted.

Apparently he had a lot to learn about her, including uncovering her secrets. Because the deets on her and the reality weren't jiving. And he didn't like being confused.

He dried off after his shower, dressed in shorts and a sleeveless shirt, and headed back outside to wait for Isabelle.

It was time to press her, to get to know her more . . . intimately. There was a lot more to Isabelle than what she showed.

He wanted to see what was written on the pages of that book she had hidden, what had upset her so much that she'd sent it flying across the room.

What made her so angry at her mother?

And why was she lying about who she was, about her sister, Angelique?

Dalton had a lot of work ahead. And very little time. So when Isabelle strolled down the gangway, he pasted on a smile. She, however, wasn't smiling.

"Still upset?" he asked, holding a chair out for her.

She slid into it and he motioned to Dimitri, who hurried over with drinks.

“Thanks,” she said, lifting the glass and taking a long swallow of the cocktail. She set it down and relaxed her shoulders. “I needed that.”

He rimmed the edge of the glass with his fingertip. “The day didn’t go as you expected?”

“No. Unrealistic expectations, I guess. I apologize for my sour mood.”

“You thought you’d find the temples on the first day.”

She stared down at the glass. “Yes, I suppose I did. Or I wanted to. I don’t know.” She lifted the glass and drained the liquid. Dimitri came over and replaced the empty glass with another full cocktail. Dalton nodded at him.

“It’s understandable to want success right away, Isabelle.”

She stared out to sea, seemingly lost in thought. “I was certain it was right there, that I was going to find it today. Stupid, childish dream. I should have known better.”

“We’ll hunt again tomorrow.”

When she turned back to him, she nodded. “Yes. Yes, we will.” Then she took another long swallow of her cocktail. “I will find it. I have to.”

Something drove her. It was almost as if she was desperate to make this find.

Maybe funds were tight for her and she needed the resources. He could help her out there.

“Don’t push yourself so hard. I have plenty of time to kill this summer, so there’s no hurry to get this done.”

“I appreciate that more than I can say, but it’s not just the money.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s personal.” She finished her drink, and once again Dimitri was right there with another, though unobtrusive and barely obvious except to Dalton.

“Personal in what way?”

She grasped the new drink and took a sip. “I have to be successful.”

“Why is it so important to you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

Dalton didn’t continue, sensing if he pushed too hard right now he’d lose her. Instead, he let her watch the sun-set, sip her cocktail, and mull over her own thoughts. He did the same, plotting his next move. She finished that drink and Dimitri brought another, this time sliding it onto the table with their dinner.

Isabelle picked at the food, but downed her drink. Dalton made sure her glass stayed full.

Yeah, he was trying to get her drunk, mainly so she’d loosen up and possibly reveal something. And she did seem to be relaxing. By the time the sun was down and the moon came up, Isabelle seemed to have lost that rigid edge she’d carried since they surfaced this afternoon. She was even smiling. They finished their meal and he dismissed the staff to their quarters, turned on music, and directed her to the lounge chairs. There was a light breeze, the night was balmy, and no other boats were nearby. Perfect.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

Isabelle slid into one of the chairs, stretching out her legs. “Not at all. This is perfect, Dalton.”

He took the chair next to her. “It’s natural to be disappointed when something doesn’t go your way. Happens to me all the time. I can be a real sonofabitch when I don’t win.”

She nodded. “I do like to win. And I’m a bitch when I don’t.”

“You don’t like anything getting in your way.”

“No, I don’t. I see something I want and I go for it. More than once that’s gotten me into trouble.”

“I know how that is. It’s hard not to want.”

“Damn hard.” She sat up, swung her legs over the side of the chaise to face him. “I want so much, Dalton. So many things it’s almost painful.” She fisted her stomach. “Right here. Sometimes I think that isn’t normal.”

More normal than she thought. “It just means you’re ambitious.”

She sniffed. “I’ve been accused of being greedy, of wanting things I shouldn’t want, shouldn’t have.”

Damn. It was like having a conversation with himself. “What happens when you don’t get what you want?”

She lifted her gaze to his. “I find a way to have it anyway.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what. Life’s too short to let the things I want pass me by.”

His lips lifted. Despite the intel about her, he liked this woman. Maybe because she reminded him of himself. Which wasn’t necessarily a good thing. There were things he’d been determined to have, too. And they had cost him dearly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I should learn patience. My sis . . . my friends and associates say I should.”

She’d almost slipped and said “sister,” which meant the alcohol was talking. Good. “Patience doesn’t get you what you want.”

“People walk over the patient. Ambition wins the prize.”

“And if people get hurt in the process?”

She shrugged, leaned back in the chaise again. “So be it. Sometimes you have to walk over a few bodies on your way to the top.”

Ouch. Did she really mean that, or was that false bravado? Her voice had changed, gone cold as she stared straight ahead and out to sea. Dalton felt the chill as if a winter wind had blanketed the yacht. An unnatural, icy coldness that evaporated when she seemed to snap out of her daze and turned to him.

“We’ll find the treasure,” she said, her smile once again warm and welcoming. “I’m sure of it.”

Interesting. Like a complete personality change that also affected the ambient temperature. There was much more to Isabelle than Dalton thought.

Though he wasn’t surprised to discover that tinge of darkness within her. He should be wary of her, but it only intrigued him more.

After all, he rarely met people like himself. But he’d wager she wasn’t even aware of what had happened.

She laid her drink on the table next to her and lifted her arms over her head.

Damn. She wore tiny little khaki shorts and a halter top. Said top pulled against her breasts as she arched her back, her nipples outlined against the light-colored material. Dalton stilled, not wanting her to move from that position.

The curve of her body was perfect. If she was naked, an artist would paint her in that pose. He wanted to move to her chair, trace the line of her hips and waist, down her legs and back up where the side of her full breast peeked out from the halter. He’d bet all the money he had that her skin felt like buttery silk.

She chose that moment to turn her head and gaze at him, offering up a knowing look.

Dalton's entire body tightened, heating in a rush of lust and overpowering sensation. His cock roared to life and he could do nothing to stop the raging pulse of his libido.

Isabelle's lips parted expectantly, the invitation obvious. All he had to do was take what she offered.

His breathing shortened, his circuits going haywire as his body centered on one thing. Woman. Flesh. He wanted to kiss her, to see if she tasted as good as she looked. But he didn't want to stop there. His thoughts went deeper. Being inside her, moving against her, feeling her yield underneath him. How long had it been? He didn't even remember the last time. All he knew was he wanted this. Right now. With Isabelle.

But he held firm, the revelations from tonight stopping him. They were too much alike; there was more at stake than just a joining of the flesh. He wasn't even certain what would happen if the two of them . . .

No. He wasn't ready for this, wasn't sure he could even handle it. His mind warred with his body, the struggle intense as he fought against what he wanted more than anything, but knew he shouldn't have.

Finally, he swallowed and turned his gaze to the sea.

He heard her soft sigh, knew he'd insulted her, but couldn't figure out what the hell to say or do to fix it.

"I think I'll turn in for the night," she said after a few moments of anguished silence. "It was a long day and I want to get a head start in the morning."

He heard her, but didn't trust himself to look at her again. Whether it was embarrassment at his hesitation or his lack of trust in the raging beast inside him, he didn't know.

"Sure. I'll see you in the morning."

He heard her walk down the hall, then the door close to her room. Only then did he exhale, lean forward, and drag his hands through his hair.

Fuck. He hadn't been prepared for this. Everything else, yes. This, no.

He stood, trying to shake off the effects that lightning bolt of sensation had caused.

He'd had Isabelle all set up, primed, relaxed and ready. With a little coaxing, he could have gotten what he wanted.

And maybe an unexpected bonus.

But that wasn't what he was here to do.

He walked to the side of the yacht, his fingers curling tight to the rail as he tilted his head back, searching the heavens for answers to his dilemma.

Could he really do this assignment? Even if it meant taking that next step with Isabelle, knowing what he was, what he was capable of ?

It was his job. He had to do his job, no matter what it entailed.

Even if his job included succumbing to the most sinful, sultry temptation.

He'd walked down that road before, hadn't he? It wasn't like the result could be any worse than the last time he'd chosen hell over heaven.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After last night's oh-so-clear rejection, Angelique had done her best to steer clear of Ryder. She had gone straight to bed, and spent the entire next day going about her business and ignoring him. Not that she really had any business to do. She was stuck in this house with a man who had no desire to be there with her.

Though that wasn't true. At least the desire part. Evidence of said desire had been quite clear last night, yet he'd still pushed her away—which both insulted and intrigued her.

Fine. That wasn't the purpose of their being together anyway. It would mean complications neither of them wanted or needed, so he'd been right to put a stop to it. He'd been the levelheaded one; she'd been all gooey and emotional and passionate. She'd have pressed on, and that would have been a mistake.

Thankfully, one of them had common sense. Her mother had always told her that her passion and curiosity would land her in trouble, that she was too open, too willing to give her heart. That she should be more wary. But that just wasn't Angelique's nature.

She should probably start remembering her mother's advice and save herself some heartache.

Something about Ryder sparked her, though. She'd been attracted to men before and never done anything about it. So what was it about him that made her so stupid?

She rolled her eyes and looked out the kitchen window. Ryder was outside talking on his cell phone. Frowning. News, maybe? Should she even bother to care?

She'd had breakfast, lain by the pool the better part of the day until her skin had turned prunish, then taken a shower and fixed dinner. Just a salad with some leftover chicken that Ryder had barbecued the night before. She supposed she could wander out there and let him know it was ready.

She stepped out the door and toward him. His frown deepened when he saw her approach.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Lou," he said. "We should stay put here. Isolating them from each other keeps the demons from centralizing everyone. I think that's what they want, everyone in a single location."

What was he talking about? Or who?

She waited while he listened.

"I am trying to find out," he continued. "Do you think I'd still be here if I already knew?"

She arched a brow. She knew what he was talking about. The black diamond. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, impatiently waiting for him to get off the phone.

"I don't know. Nothing's happened here yet, so we're safe for the moment. But that could change. I'll let you know."

He hung up and turned to her.

"What?" she asked, observing the tension in his muscles.

He seemed reluctant to say anything. Something big was happening.

"Ryder, tell me."

"Dalton found your sister."

Dread mixed with excitement, her stomach flipping over. "Where? Is she all right?"

“She’s fine. She’s in Malta on an archaeological dive.”

Angelique exhaled, then sat on the chaise lounge. “Thank God. When do we leave?”

“We don’t.”

She stared up at him, his face shadowed by the falling sun behind him. “What?”

“We’re not leaving, Angie. We’re staying put.”

Oh, no. They weren’t going to do this to her. “I need to see my sister.”

“That’s the worst possible thing we could do.”

“Why?”

“Because putting you and Isabelle in the same place is exactly what the Sons of Darkness want.”

“It is not. They don’t care at all about me. They want Isabelle.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that. If they wanted me, they had a shot at me in Australia. They know I’m worthless to them.”

He sat in the chaise next to hers. “Angie, there’s a lot we don’t know about them, about their motives and plans. It’s best to keep you and your sister separated for now.”

Then it struck her. “You’re doing this to punish me because I won’t tell you where the black diamond is hidden.”

His narrowed gaze showed his anger at her statement. “No, I’m doing this to keep you safe.”

She didn't believe him. "Ryder, I have to see Isabelle. I need to talk to her, to find out where she's been, what's been going on with her. Something's wrong."

"Dalton said she's fine. He's watching over her."

"Dalton doesn't know her like I do."

"He doesn't need to know her to keep her safe."

Panic bubbled through her bloodstream, a sense of urgency the likes of which she'd never felt before. Even though they were outside in the open air, she felt closed in, like she couldn't breathe. She had to get out of here, and to Malta. The need to see Isabelle was overwhelming, the sense of danger multiplying by the second.

But what could she do? Ryder would never let her leave.

She knew then what she'd have to give up. "I'll give you the black diamond if you take me to Isabelle."

He looked at her like she'd just sprouted two heads. "What?"

"I'll take you to the black diamond. The Realm of Light can have it. I just want to see my sister."

He stood, walked a few steps, then turned to her. "I don't believe you. What kind of game are you playing now, Angie?"

She rose from the chaise and followed him. "I'm not playing any game. I need you to understand how important this is to me. I've been looking for Isabelle for months. I need to be with her."

"Enough that you're willing to give up the black diamond, just like that."

"Yes."

"Bullshit."

Frustration made her stomach hurt. “What can I do to convince you? Let’s leave now. I’ll take you to the black diamond immediately, then once we retrieve it we can go to Isabelle.”

She could tell from the look on his face he thought she was lying, that she was playing some kind of angle in order to get him to release her from the house. Did he have so little faith in her?

Of course. Because of Australia. Because she’d left with the black diamond after he’d asked her to wait.

Would she have to pay for that forever?

“Look. I understand you don’t trust me anymore. I’m sorry about Australia, about hiding the black diamond. But you have to understand that my sister comes first. I was afraid for her then, and I still am. I don’t know who to trust, Ryder.”

“Did I ever give you a reason not to trust me? Did I ever hurt you or betray you, Angie?”

Damn. “No.”

“Then why did you run?”

“Because I was afraid. I thought you might be dead, that I was alone. And I knew the black diamond was important. I couldn’t just leave it there. It has some connection to me, or to Isabelle, and I couldn’t just walk away knowing the Sons of Darkness wanted it so badly. I’ve been doing this on my own for so long, I didn’t know how to ask for help.”

“Yes, you are the self-sufficient woman, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you understand anything about family?”

He snorted. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, Angie. Don’t talk to me about family, because I’m as clueless as they come.” He walked away.

She followed, refusing to be dismissed. She grabbed his arm and spun him around. “Don’t walk away from me, goddamit. Look, I don’t know what your issues are with family, with trust and responsibility. But I love my sister.”

“Oh, right. You’ve been singing her praises to me.”

“I might not agree with the way she lives her life, or her motivations and the way she acts, but I still care what happens to her. I need to know she’s okay. She’s the only family I have left.”

“Sometimes family isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Sometimes it’s best to walk away.”

“Who in your family hurt you, Ryder? Who made you so bitter?”

He grabbed her arms and jerked her to him. “Don’t.” His voice went low, dangerous, the anger radiating through him shocking her. The darkness in his gaze was menacing, but she didn’t feel threatened despite his steely grip. She stared him down.

“I’m not frightened of you, Ryder. You might be all tough on the outside, but you’d never hurt me.” As she said the words, she knew they were true.

He released her and stepped back. “Don’t play at psychoanalysis, Angie. Not with me. Not ever. Now go inside. We’re done talking.”

She felt chilled at the loss of his touch, despite the warmth of the sun on her skin.

What had happened to make him hate family so much? What had his family done to him?

And did he think so little of her that he figured one tough-guy exhibition and she’d run for the house and lock the doors? She knew him better than he thought she did.

She followed him to the ocean ledge, slid her hip onto the wide stones, close enough that her thigh touched his. He didn’t flinch or move away.

“Family is tough sometimes,” she started.

He didn’t reply.

“My mother was an incredible woman. So giving and warm. She loved Isabelle and me so much, even though we were so different from each other. But she knew how to handle us. When she got sick and knew she was dying, she told me I was the stronger one, that I had to watch out for Isabelle, because Mother was . . . concerned.”

That got his attention. He turned to her. “Concerned about what?”

Angelique shrugged. “She didn’t elaborate. I figured she was afraid Isabelle would get in trouble. Mother wanted me to keep an eye on her, and I promised I would.”

Ryder nodded. “A deathbed promise. Kind of a tough burden.”

“Not really. It was just a promise. And despite my constant disagreements with Isabelle, I have always watched over her, as much as I could, anyway. As much as she’d allow.”

“Does she need watching?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “Over the years I’ve realized that she does.”

“Because?”

“Like I told you, Izzy has a dark side.”

“And that worries you.”

“Of course it worries me. I always thought it was just greed, a personality quirk. Now I’m certain it’s much more than that.”

He gave her a quick nod, and she hoped he at least listened to her, that in some way he understood how important it was that she get to her sister.

“Ryder, she’s all I have.”

There was nothing more she could say. She stood and walked toward the house, hoping it was enough to convince him.

Well, hell. Ryder knew Angie wasn't up to something. She really was concerned about her sister.

But he was being honest with her when he told her that getting her together with Isabelle was a bad idea. It was best to keep them separated for now.

Was she serious about giving up the black diamond, though? Wasn't that his goal, to get the diamond from her? Could he trust that she meant what she said, that she'd lead him right to it in exchange for his taking her to Isabelle?

He had to weigh the options. Maybe she was right. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to take her to Isabelle. Hell, maybe she could find out information about Isabelle better than Dalton could. Then again, it might do more harm than good. Dalton was working on Isabelle without her knowing who he was. The last thing he wanted to do was blow Dalton's cover by marching in there with Angelique in tow and having Angie spill all their secrets.

Then again, it would solve a lot of their problems to have the black diamond—if Angie was being honest about leading him to it. Could he really trust her?

Shit. He was going to have to consider his options, then make a decision by tomorrow morning. He went inside. Angie was in the tiny kitchen.

"There's chicken salad. Eat," she said, keeping her gaze averted.

They ate, neither one of them talking. After, he helped her with the cleanup and she went to the bedroom without a word or a look.

She wasn't angry, though.

He supposed there wasn't any more she could say to him.

Or, for that matter, that he could say to her. They'd both said it all and they were at a stalemate. At least until he figured out what the next step would be.

He sat back on the sofa and stared down the hall at the closed door to the bedroom. A couple hours later, the light was still on. He worked on the weapons, occasionally glancing toward her bedroom door.

The light stayed on. Maybe she'd fallen asleep. Maybe she was reading.

Maybe he shouldn't care.

He finally lay down on the sofa, making sure he was positioned so he wasn't looking toward her room, since he felt ridiculous enough wondering what she was doing.

But he wasn't at all tired—which is why he heard the click of the door opening to her room. Senses on full alert, he wished he hadn't been so goddamned stubborn and had turned around to watch her bedroom. Was that her coming out, or someone going in?

He tightened his grip on the hilt of the knife at his belt, waiting and listening. Whoever or whatever it was crept closer to him. He could hear breathing, low to the ground, approaching the sofa where he lay.

In two seconds someone or something was going to be face-to-face with him.

He clenched the knife.

He was ready.

CHAPTER NINE

Ryder.”

He exhaled when he realized it was Angelique. He took his cue from her and didn’t move. “Yeah,” he whispered back.

“I heard something at the window to my room.”

“Back up.”

She inched over and he took a slow roll off the sofa, using his hands to break his fall so he made no noise. They lay side by side, flat on their bellies, while Ryder studied the hallway and her room.

Deathly silence filled the air, the two of them barely breathing. He strained to hear noises around them, anything that would signal something out of the ordinary.

He waited for a crash through the window or door, but it didn’t happen. Instead, a mist began to materialize at the bedroom door, a slow appearance of white smoke, drifting upward from the floor.

“Do you see that?” Angelique asked.

“Yeah.”

“I need a weapon.”

He pulled a blade out from his stash and handed it to her. “If anything comes at you, use this. There are more weapons around the house.”

“I know where they are,” she said.

He felt the steeled tension in her body as they both raised up on their knees.

“Get behind me. Until we know if there’s just one or more, let me handle this.”

She moved, and he was glad he wouldn’t have to argue with her. He was pretty sure that after the last time she faced one of these new demons, she wouldn’t want to go another round unless she had to. At least now she was armed, which gave him a bit of comfort and worried him at the same time.

If she had a weapon it could be used against her. He hoped there was only one demon, but who could tell from the white tornado swirling up in the middle of the hallway.

He noted it didn’t happen in an instant. That was a good thing for demon hunters. They’d at least know these fuckers were coming.

One demon materialized, the same kind as he had fought before, its pale eyes glowing in the semidarkness.

It didn’t move at first, just made a slight turn of its head from side to side, as if sensing the air around it. Then it zeroed in on their direction and moved forward.

Ryder snapped to his feet, Angelique scrambling to do the same. He drew his weapons, a dagger in each hand, and stepped toward the demon.

“Stay out of the way, and always behind me,” Ryder warned.

“Got it.”

The demon ignored Ryder, seemingly intent on getting to Angelique. Exactly what he expected, so he stepped in front of it each time the demon made a motion toward Angie.

When the demon raised its arm to push Ryder out of the way, Ryder sliced it with one of the daggers, feeling a sense of satisfaction when the demon snatched its arm back, hissing in pain. The wounded skin sizzled and began

to deteriorate immediately. The demon focused first on its own melting skin, then turned a menacing glare on Ryder.

Emotion. Odd for a demon. This one was damned pissed off, too. Growling, snarling, holding its wounded arm as if in pain.

This was good stuff. Anger and pain were distractions to the demon.

And working out perfectly, since its attention was on Ryder now and not Angelique.

“Come on, fucker. Come at me.” Ryder felt his own rage building and used it to shore up his strength.

The demon lunged at him, this time maneuvering to avoid the daggers. It was strong, grasping Ryder’s left arm and applying a tight, painful squeeze. Ryder stabbed the demon with the dagger in his right hand and the demon let go, backing away again.

The only problem was that even though he was wounding the creature, the skin around the injury began to regenerate.

That sucked.

“Ryder, there’s another one coming,” Angelique said.

He didn’t have time to look, his attention only on the demon he fought. “Let me know when it’s fully formed,” he said, his back turned to her. His primary objective was keeping the demon focused on him, and away from Angelique. Hopefully he could get this one down in time to battle the next one.

With renewed effort, he lunged and attacked the demon, stabbing with the daggers and wishing he’d pulled one of the swords instead so he’d have a longer weapon reach. The demon feinted back at every swipe of the knife, then surged forward to grab at Ryder again. Sometimes it missed, sometimes it didn’t, grabbing Ryder in its bone-crushing grip.

What kind of Wheaties were they feeding these demons anyway? This sonofabitch was superstrong, and being on a hardwood floor wasn't helping. The demon was pushing, and Ryder had nothing to dig into with his boots. He was sliding backward. The demon gave a hard shove and Ryder went flying, slamming against the stone wall. He grunted at the pain, but filed it away for later, pushing off the wall to go after the demon again.

He caught sight of the next demon, its mist continuing to rise up from the kitchen floor. Angelique, armed, moved toward it.

"Don't," he warned her. Her gaze shot to his but he didn't have time to hold it, his attention turning back to the demon he fought. This one had to die, before Angie tried to engage the other one. With renewed effort, he went low and embedded the dagger in the demon's midsection. With a look of surprise the creature stilled, using both hands in an attempt to pull the dagger out.

Oh, yeah. Got you now.

Ryder used that momentary advantage to swing the other dagger up and jab it deep in the demon's chest, right where its heart *should* be. The demon's eyes widened; it tilted its head back and howled, an unholy sound.

The demon began to shudder, both hands still around the dagger in its stomach. It dropped its head and stared at Ryder.

"You can't kill me."

Its voice was hoarse, filled with frustrated anger.

"Heard that one before," Ryder replied, stepping back as the demon began to disappear, reforming into its original mist.

He didn't know if he'd killed it, but at least the damn thing was going away. Soon the demon was invisible, nothing but white smoke, then gone.

"Ryder!"

Ryder pivoted at Angelique's warning tone and raised his daggers, but too late. The demon was on him and grabbed him by the throat, shoving him back against the wall.

Trapped and his breath cut off, Ryder struggled for air and fought to break free. The demon had his arms pinned against his sides so he couldn't raise the daggers to stab the monster.

Shit. White spots flickered in front of his eyes. He was losing consciousness, felt himself weakening as his airway was cut off.

He didn't have much time left, nor the strength to fight the demon.

Where was Angie? He closed his eyes, trying to summon the last ounce of his strength, but the demon was too strong.

Then the demon abruptly released its hold around his neck. Ryder sucked in massive gulps of air, blinking to clear his field of vision. As soon as he could focus again he took in the scene in front of him, certain he had to be delusional. What he saw couldn't be right.

Angelique was behind the demon, both hands wrapped around its throat. Her fingernails were embedded in its neck, blood pouring from where she had wounded it.

The demon wasn't struggling. Instead, it stared at Ryder, wide-eyed with shock. Then it turned to mist, vanishing within an iridescent cloud.

Now all he could see was Angelique, her hands still held in the same position they'd been when she'd attacked the demon, her fingers covered with its blood. Her long nails—no, they looked like claws—re-formed into her normal short ones.

Holy Christ. What the hell had just happened here?

He took a step forward. "Angie."

She wore no expression on her face, as if she were looking straight through him. It was like her mind was somewhere else.

“Angelique.” He reached for her arms, drew them down to her sides. “It’s over now. The demon is gone.”

She blinked. Looked up at him. Her arms began to shake, then the rest of her, and he knew what was going to happen. He slid an arm around her waist just as she crumpled. Her eyes swept closed, her head drooping against his shoulder as he eased them both to the floor.

Thirty seconds ago she’d been a warrior.

Now she was out cold.

And he had a million questions about what he’d just seen. Because no way could a normal human woman kill a demon with her bare hands. No matter how strong her fingernails were.

Besides, Angie had short, stubby fingernails. The ones she’d embedded in the demon were like two-inch claws. And after she’d pulled them out, they disappeared.

He picked up her hand. So small and delicate, yet covered in blood.

He rubbed his fingers across her skin, wondering how such a small woman could have kicked that demon’s ass.

Did Angie have demon blood in her? Or did something else happen to her in that cave in Australia? Wasn’t that part of what he’d been sent to find out? She’d just exhibited some kind of superpower, definitely. Evil . . . not that he’d noticed. She’d killed a demon, then passed out. She hadn’t taken that long-clawed fury out on him, she’d taken it out on the demon. That was a good sign.

And the new demons . . . interesting breed. He had to report to Lou about them. Strong, seemed to be able to survive the silver-tipped daggers, though he was able to make one disintegrate if he could get the dagger in deep enough.

Trial and error. Fun stuff. If he didn't get killed in the process. He'd like it a lot better if he could just shove his fingers in their throats like Angelique had done. He wondered what that would feel like.

Just the thought of killing them that way gave him an adrenaline rush. He hated to admit it, but he envied Angie's ability to destroy the demon. He had to rely on weapons.

Angelique stirred. He looked down at her and she raised her lids, her inky lashes lifting to reveal confused eyes.

"You passed out," he informed her.

She sat, reaching for her head, but stilled when she saw her bloodied hands. "Oh, God. What did I do?"

"Don't you remember?"

She nodded. "Wait. Yes. I . . . killed that thing. I did kill it, didn't I?"

"Hell if I know. But it disappeared after you stuck your nails in its throat."

She looked pale. "*Mon Dieu.*" She pushed away and started to stand. Ryder got up first, then helped her. She was still a little unsteady on her feet.

"I'm all right. I need to wash my hands."

She wasn't all right as she weaved her way to the bathroom and turned on the water. Really hot water. She washed, taking a brush to scrub the blood from her hands until they were clean. Through it all, she remained silent. He did, too, knowing she had to go through the process. Some didn't handle a kill well. He waited to see how Angelique was going to deal with it.

He'd bet Angie didn't know any more about what she'd done than he did. She seemed to be as surprised about it as he was.

After she dried her hands, he helped her to the sofa, though she seemed to be strengthening more and more with each passing minute. He went to the

fridge and got them both something cold to drink. She took several gulps of juice before placing the bottle on the table.

“Thank you. I was dry.”

“You’re welcome.” He studied her, looking for any other changes in her. Nothing. She looked and acted just like the normal Angelique. Normal facial features, no fangs, fingernails still normal. Her eyes were clear, though confused.

“I have no idea where that came from, Ryder. The demon went after you and this . . . feeling just came over me.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“Anger. I saw that thing grab you by the throat and I was furious. I stood right in front of it, weapons in hand, and instead of coming at me, it skirted around me as if I didn’t exist and headed straight for you.”

Ryder resisted the urge to smile. “It pissed you off that the demon didn’t come for you?”

“Hell, yes, it did. It went after you with a vengeance, as if you were the only threat. What am I? Week-old moldy lasagna? I’m not without skills, you know.”

He snickered at her taking offense at not being attacked by the demon. “Darlin’, I appreciate your thought process, really. And thanks for coming to my defense. That bastard had me by the throat and my arms pinned. I couldn’t get at my weapons or slash at him.” She’d saved his life.

She shrugged. “I have no idea what I did. It was as if something took me over. Almost like flipping a switch inside me. I felt this burst of anger, then an incredible surge of immense power. I was on autopilot after that. Is it dead?”

“I think so. At the least, it’s gone.”

“Good enough.” She looked down at her hands. “So now I suppose I’ve added to your problems.”

“In what way?”

“You have to figure out what happened to me to make me like . . . that. Do you suppose touching the black diamond in Australia did something to me?”

“Maybe. I don’t know the answer to that.”

“Neither do I. It’s scary. But exciting, too. I liked that power.” She lifted her head and he read the truth in her eyes. “It’s both exhilarating and terrifying and I’d like to know the answer myself.”

She was right about that. He would have to figure out what had happened to her. But one thing had happened.

She’d surprised him. She could have run like hell when he’d been engaged with the demons. Instead, she’d stayed and fought. She’d even had his back, killing a demon in order to save his life.

“You killed your first demon.”

She grinned. “I have to admit, it feels good to know that, even if the method was bizarre. If we did, in fact, kill them.”

He shrugged. “Who knows. Either way, they’re gone. And so are we.”

“What do you mean?”

“They found us again. I don’t know how, but they obviously know where we are.” He stood and gathered up the weapons he’d used to fight the demons. Angelique bent down to help him.

“So where are we going?”

He took the daggers to the kitchen to clean them off. “The one place we’re not going is where the black diamond is hidden.”

“Because the Sons of Darkness will be able to find it then.”

“Yes. They’ve tracked you to every location where you’ve hidden.”

“Based on what happened with me, do you think I’m connected to them somehow?”

He turned and studied her. She asked the question matter-of-factly, as if she really didn’t know the answer. He didn’t think she was trying to hide anything. It seemed as if she was as much in the dark about her newly demonstrated power as he was.

“I don’t know. It’s possible that you have some kind of connection to the Sons of Darkness. Either way, I’m not going to risk the black diamond by letting you lead me to it. Not right now, anyway.”

He turned off the water and grabbed a towel, pivoting around to lean against the sink so he could face her.

“Where are we going?” she asked again.

He knew the question she wasn’t asking. She wanted to know if he was going to take her to her sister. Now more than ever he was convinced that was a colossally bad idea.

“I’m not sure. But we’ve gotta keep moving, and hope we can stay a step ahead of the Sons of Darkness until I can figure out what the hell is going on.”

“Okay.”

“Better get packing. I want to leave now.”

She nodded and headed into the bedroom. Ryder jammed his few things into his bag, pausing when he was finished to stare down the hall into her room.

Okay, she amazed him. Infuriated and frustrated him. But she was an exceptionally strong woman. She didn’t scare easily, she was a fighter, and

she didn't run. A lot of women, and men, would have buckled under what had just happened. Angie accepted it, played the possible scenarios over in her mind, and came up with possible outcomes.

She'd make a good hunter. And an ally. And a partner.

It was going to really suck if she turned out to be a demon, because he was starting to care what happened to her.

CHAPTER TEN

Angelique was so tired she couldn't see straight.

Ryder had kept them moving, driving all night and well into the next day. She was tired of sitting in the car going nowhere, nodding off only to jerk upright and wonder where they were, how long she'd been asleep and how far they'd traveled. The island wasn't that big. For all she knew they could be driving in circles. She wanted a shower and a bed.

"Ryder, please. I'm hungry. I'm exhausted and my back hurts. Just stop at a hotel so we can get a few hours' rest."

He glanced her way, and she must have looked pitiful enough, because he nodded. Within a half hour he had pulled into a coast-side motel and gotten them a room. They grabbed a quick bite at a small restaurant a short walk down the road. Her stomach full, the next objective was a shower and clean clothes.

Ryder unlocked the door, stopping her and making her wait outside while he inspected the room as if he expected to find demons lurking inside. Ha. He should have let her go in first. At this point she was a demon's worst enemy. She'd have fought fiercely to the death for the rights to the shower and bed in that room. For some reason she found that visual amusing, no doubt due to her lack of sleep. Ryder motioned her inside. A tiny room, with a small double bed, crisp white sheets, and airconditioning. She breathed a sigh of relief. To her, it was a palace. She tossed her bag on the bed and went straight for the bathroom to turn on the shower, desperate to wash off the grit.

The steamy water felt magnificent. She could stay in there forever, but didn't want to hog the shower, so she cleaned up and got out, grabbed a towel, and tucked it around her. When she stepped out of the bathroom,

Ryder stood at the window, peeking outside through a slit in the closed curtains.

“Any demons in the parking lot?” she teased.

He turned, glanced at her, then frowned. “You should get dressed.”

She didn’t, irritated and cranky and tired of taking orders from him. She sat on the bed. “I’m exhausted, Ryder. Why don’t you go take a shower?”

He turned back toward the window. “I’m fine.”

She stood and approached him, lifting on her toes to peer over his shoulder. “It’s almost dark again. You haven’t slept in almost twenty-four hours.”

“I can handle it.”

She placed her hand on his shoulder, refusing to pull back when he flinched. “I can feel the tension in your body. You need to unwind a little. We’ll be okay.”

He didn’t answer.

“You’ve got to let go. If demons come, we’ll deal with it, but you have to rest sometime. If you don’t, you won’t do either of us any good. Now go take a shower, let the water relax your body.”

“That’s not what I need.”

“Then what do you need?”

“I need you to back away from me.”

“Why?”

It took him a few seconds to answer. “Because you smell good.”

She snorted. “That bothers you?”

“Yes.”

Ah. Now she understood. Suddenly the room seemed smaller, and her body grew warmer. She should step away and give him some space, but something stopped her. Instead, she squeezed his shoulder, felt the muscles there coil up.

“I’m warning you, Angie. Back off.”

He was exhausted and on the edge. So was she. And she sensed he really didn’t want her to back off, even though the warning tone in his voice said so. But was he trying to push her away, or was he trying to tell her he’d reached the edge of his endurance?

Was that such a bad thing? Maybe this was what they both needed. They’d been dancing around it for a long time—ever since Australia—and she was tired of it. There was something between them and she wanted to explore it, even if he didn’t think it was a good idea.

So instead of taking that step back, she inched forward, pressing fully against him. She was aware she wore only a towel, that her breasts spilled over the top, pillowing against his back. She laid her head against his shoulder.

“Angie.”

The word came out in a harsh rush of breath, as if it pained him to say it. He finally made a movement, and she held her breath.

He turned, and she tilted her head back. The first thing she saw was the heat in his eyes, the tight set of his jaw as if he were at war with himself and had just lost some internal battle. She knew all about that skirmish.

“Throw the white flag, Ryder,” she whispered.

He hooked his finger beneath the knotted towel and crushed the material in his fist. Could he feel her heart pounding against his knuckles?

His gaze was riveted on her face. She couldn't take her eyes off the harsh lines around his eyes. Years of worry, or pain. She wanted to reach out and smooth those lines away, but she was frozen to the spot, not wanting to do anything to break the spell.

His hand relaxed, and he lifted the knot from the towel, the material drifting to the floor and discarding the one barrier she had. Not that she cared. The cool airconditioning in the room didn't do a damn thing to relieve the soaring heat coursing through her body. Her skin ached. Everywhere his eyes grazed her body, a bonfire started.

"You don't even have the body type I go for. I like big tits and full hips. You're thin."

"I know." She smiled at his attempts to deliberately insult her. Did he think that would drive her away? She knew what he was doing. He was trying to protect himself. Or maybe protect her. He was trying to get her to run.

It wasn't going to work. She was in this and she wasn't going anywhere. Besides, he didn't mean it. He'd been attracted to her since the first moment he set eyes on her in Australia. Instead, she breached those few microinches of distance he refused to take, and slid her hands over his shoulders, then down his chest.

Solid. Muscular. His heart beat wildly, just as hers did.

This was madness. And she had to have it.

"Ryder." She inhaled, breathing in the man scent of him that drove her crazy.

He pulled her against him, her breasts crushing his chest.

"I lied," he said as he locked his hands around her back.

"About what?"

"I think you're so goddamn beautiful I can't breathe when I'm around you."

Oh, God. Her belly did flip-flops, but that's all she had time for, because then his mouth was on hers, and where there had previously been heat, now there was an inferno. She was consumed by it as he devoured her lips with a hunger that curled her toes.

She'd been desired by men before, pursued by them, but not like this, not with this raging, animalistic wanting. Ryder growled against her mouth. It ratcheted up her own need, driving a fury inside her that made her blood boil. She fumbled at the hem of his shirt, tearing it out of his pants, desperate to feel his skin. And when she palmed the flat plane of his stomach, she burned hot—fiery hot.

She was drawn to that flame, wanting to be inside it, to melt until there was nothing left of her. She wanted to touch him everywhere.

She tore her lips away to mumble that he had way too many clothes on and she wanted them out of the way. She pushed away from him, taking a step back while he jerked the shirt over his head, then toed off his boots and popped the button on his pants, shrugging out of them.

He stood proudly naked before her and she sucked in a breath of pure female delight. He was so beautiful, all muscular angles and planes. She wanted to admire his body as she had when she'd caught a glimpse of him in the shower a few days ago. But that would have to wait for later. Now she needed contact. She climbed back into his arms and he lifted her so she could wrap her legs around his waist and search for his mouth again. His tongue twined with hers and licked with devilish intent, mastering her with each velvety stroke until she went liquid. He carried her to the bed and laid her down, not once breaking contact as he climbed on top of her.

His face was tight with strain as he loomed over her. He spread her arms out to her sides and stared down at her.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Be certain.”

Was he joking? His cock rested hot and heavy on her thigh, sweat beaded between her breasts, she was panting like a damn dog in heat because she wanted this so badly—and he was asking her if she was sure? “Dammit, Ryder. I’m not sixteen.”

“No, you sure as hell aren’t.” He leaned over her, covering her body with his.

Oh, the contact of skin to skin was just what she needed. To feel him pressed full on against her was everything she’d wanted. There was so much muscle on him, and she felt every inch of it against her. She was so slight and he was massive, overshadowing her slight frame.

Instead of intimidating her, she thrilled to his possession, the way he buried his face in her neck and seemed to linger there, just breathing her in.

She felt a sense of urgency. He didn’t, taking his time to lick along the pulse point of her neck. Oh, did that ever drive her nuts. She tilted her head to the side to give him free access, her blood rushing where his lips met her skin.

That wasn’t the only place blood was rushing. With every lick of his tongue along her neck, she tingled between her legs. Mercy, that was hot. And it made her itchy to feel something else between her legs. Something hard. Something he withheld from her.

“Ryder, come on.” Hadn’t they toyed long enough?

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. “Relax, darlin’, we’re just getting started.”

No, no, no. She didn’t want foreplay now. She wanted sex. Him inside her, thrusting hard. Damn him. She struggled, deciding to take over.

But clearly Ryder wasn’t having any part of letting her take the lead, because when she tried to lift, he held firm to her wrists.

“Uh-uh.” Instead, he dipped down and licked her nipple.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, both hating and loving the wet heat of his mouth. Too much, not enough, she wanted more of this. She moaned, bit down on her lip to silence herself, and fumed that she couldn’t break away from his tight hold on her. His body had her pinned from the waist down, and his hands had a viselike grip on her arms. She was going nowhere until he decided otherwise.

And he was determined to torture her by paying lavish attention to her breasts, licking them, sucking them, even nibbling. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that would eliminate the sensations shooting south and threatening to make her insane.

It wasn’t working. She arched her back and drove her breasts against his oh-so-eager mouth, absolutely crazy over what he was doing to her. She hated him. She loved what he was doing to her. She was pulsing everywhere.

So much for her taking the upper hand. She was unmolded clay, soft and unformed. And Ryder was the master sculptor. She even whimpered, God help her, then clamped her lips together, realizing that would only encourage him further.

“You need to relax, Angie.”

She opened her eyes and lifted her head, realizing he was staring up at her from his position at her breasts.

“I am relaxed.”

“No, you’re not,” he said with a smart-ass grin. “What’s wrong? Used to being on top?”

Damn, the man was irritating. “As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Too bad.” He dragged her wrists with him as he crawled down her body, kissing her belly button along the way. Every single touch of his lips to her skin was a blasted heat furnace. Despite her discomfort at his determination to engage in some serious foreplay when all she wanted was fucking, she couldn’t help but stare down at him when he kissed her inner thigh.

“I know why you’re wound so tight,” he said, his gaze meeting hers as he applied a torturous, long, slow lick to the spot where her thigh joined her sex. “You need to come.”

He had no idea how much. But not this way. Not in the way that left her so out of control. Didn’t he realize she never let men take over like this? Didn’t he unders—

Her thought process was lost when his mouth covered her sex. Wet and hot were the only words that came to mind as an explosion rocketed her. She melted against him as she released over and over again, almost embarrassingly, but couldn’t stop the waves of climax that took over and wouldn’t stop. It had been so long and she was so primed, she hadn’t known she was so ready to fly right over the top. And he was a damned expert at knowing just where her trigger points were. How could he do this to her? How could he know her so well?

He let go of her wrists and climbed up her body, pressing his lips to hers, devouring her mouth in a long, drugging kiss that soon had her raging hot again.

She dragged her fingers through his hair, tugging it with an angry fierceness that had more to do with her exasperation at his prowess over her body than any passion she might feel.

And he knew it, too, because he half growled, half laughed against her lips, as if he knew exactly why she was so mad.

Damn man. He might have given her a Fourth of July fireworks orgasm once, but she wasn’t going to allow him to do that to her again.

He nudged her legs farther apart with his knee and pushed inside her, scooping one hand under her butt to lift her against him.

A tight fit, her body pulsed around him in appreciation, once again betraying her as it began to contract when he slid in and out with such a perfect rhythm it brought tears to her eyes.

She sighed, surrendered the fight, and gave up on her frustration, instead enjoying the supreme pleasure this amazing man gave her. She relaxed and moved into his embrace, kissing him back with full abandon and no sense of anger, throwing her whole body and mind into the experience. He rolled them to the side and lifted her leg so he could thrust deeper, rocking against her slow and easy.

In this position they were face-to-face, eye to eye, and it was so unbearably intimate. She caressed his beardstubbled cheek, rubbed his bottom lip with her fingertip until he took it in his mouth and sucked on it. The sensation made her clench around him and he stilled.

“Damn” was all he said, then all pretense of gentle movements was finished. He gripped her buttocks in a tight hold and began to pump furiously inside her.

She loved this wild side of him and held on, going with him on such an intense ride that when she flew to climax this time, she wasn’t at all surprised, nor annoyed. And he went with her, groaning and taking her mouth with a hungry kiss that left them both panting in its wake.

Satiated and exhausted, she laid her head against his chest while he rubbed her back, and it wasn’t long before she felt her eyelids grow heavy. With Ryder still inside her, she smiled, not able to recall when she’d been more content. Or when she’d felt more protected and cared for.

She let her eyes close and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dalton couldn't help but grin at Isabelle. She was so happy after today's find one would think she had just raised the *Titanic*, when all she'd discovered was a broken piece of stone pottery. To her, though, it was one hell of a treasure.

They'd spent the better part of the afternoon on this dive, and the pottery was all they'd manage to bring up.

At least she was easy to please. She stood on the deck grinning from ear to ear as she examined the piece from all sides.

They'd climbed back aboard the yacht to shower and change. Dimitri had dinner and drinks ready for them on deck. Isabelle set the pottery on the table as they ate.

"So, have you found Atlantis?" he asked as they finished up dinner.

She gazed at the pottery, then at Dalton, her eyes bright with enthusiasm. "I don't know. I'll have to have it authenticated, and then there'll be the disbelievers of course, but I think we're close." She didn't even try to hold back her grin. Her cheeks were flushed as she breathed in deeply and exhaled.

"It seems such a small piece. Not too much to get excited about."

She arched a brow. "Are you trying to burst my bubble?"

"Maybe just an attempt to keep you grounded. I don't want you disappointed."

"Awww, does that mean you care?"

He laughed. "I'm merely protecting my investment."

She leaned back in the chair and raised her glass. "Which investment, Dalton? Me or the dive?"

"You, of course. You're the biggest asset on this expedition. You're the specialist. Without you, all of this fails."

She stared, blinked, her lips parting as if she was surprised by his words. "Thank you. I wasn't fishing for compliments, but that was nice. I don't often get to feel special."

He leaned forward, grasped a tendril of her hair. "You should be made to feel special all the time. I'm surprised you aren't often showered with praise and attention."

That garnered a snort.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." She pulled away from him and stared down at her goblet.

"You don't think you're worthy of having attention lavished on you?"

"Let's not go there."

Was she playing a game, or did she have issues? He wanted to press this. "Oh, let's do go there. I think you're beautiful, Isabelle. And a skilled archaeologist. Driven and a hard worker."

Her gaze lifted, her eyes liquid pools of emerald. "Now you're making me blush. And I never blush. Stop it."

He liked the heightened color in her cheeks. It brought out a sense of inexperience in her he found incredibly appealing. He'd like to think he was a pretty good judge of people, knew when they were playing him and when there were honest emotions involved. She was having a hard time taking this praise, almost as if she didn't believe it of herself. This person across

from him exuded warmth and innocence. And yet at other times she was supremely confident, driven, to the point of being cold and ruthless.

There really were two sides to Isabelle Deveraux.

“Maybe that’s why you work so hard to succeed.”

“Excuse me?”

“A lot of people look for approval in success.”

Her brows tilted in a slight frown. “Are you trying to psychoanalyze me now?”

He offered a slight laugh. “No. Believe me, I’d be no good at that. But I do enjoy trying to figure people out, what makes them do the things they do.”

“I wouldn’t even make an attempt to do that with me.”

“See? Now you’re being mysterious. And that intrigues me.”

The breeze blew tendrils of her hair across her cheek. She brushed them behind her ear. “There’s no mystery about me. I gave you my bio, my background. You know everything.”

He’d barely scratched the surface. And he found he wanted to know more. Much more than what this assignment called for. Isabelle was definitely a mystery. Beyond what she showed him on the surface was a pain that she couldn’t quite hide. It lingered just underneath her eyes, surfacing now and then.

She wasn’t as good at playing this game as she thought she was. And Dalton was a master at disguise.

He was going to enjoy putting together the pieces of this puzzle.

“You’re staring.”

He blinked. “Was I?”

“Yes.”

“Does that bother you?”

“It depends on the reason.”

“I was staring because the moonlight makes your hair shine like spun gold, because your eyes light up when you talk, and because that dress molds to you like a second skin. I can’t seem to help but stare.”

She inhaled, the swell of her breasts more pronounced as she did.

Dalton waved his hand and Dimitri reached under the bar and turned on the stereo. Music filled the deck and Isabelle tilted her head back and laughed.

Under the lights, her hair glistened. She’d left it down, and it spilled over her breasts. Tonight she wore a well-fitting sundress, low-cut and revealing a lot of cleavage.

Dalton tried to concentrate on her face, but his gaze kept dipping down. After too many drinks and not enough food today, he was in trouble, and his libido wanted to take over. And Isabelle wasn’t making him think like a Boy Scout.

He was no angel, after all.

Yeah, he was definitely no angel. And the more time he spent with Isabelle, the more his thoughts wandered to less-than-angelic areas. The woman was sinfully seductive and compelling to his dark side. And God knew he had a dark side.

The upbeat rock song ended and a slow, seductive one started up.

“Ah, now this is the kind of music I’m in the mood for,” Isabelle said, pushing back her chair to stand. She looked down at him with a seductive stare. “Let’s dance.”

Oh, shit. He was supposed to play the part of suave, debonair playboy millionaire. He supposed turning tail and hiding in his room wouldn’t cut it.

He'd turned her down last night. He couldn't do it again.

He didn't want to do it again. A man only had so much restraint.

Dalton had been restrained for too long. As long as he'd been with the Realm of Light, he'd toed the line, done everything right, never once walked on the wild side. He'd never once touched a woman in all that time.

Too long. Much too long. So why now, and why with Isabelle?

He gave up trying to figure it out.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Story of his life, wasn't it?

He stood and moved out onto the deck, holding his palm out. When she laid her hand in his, he felt the slight electrical current sizzle through his veins and knew he was doomed.

The bad part was, he didn't think he cared. This was his assignment, after all—to get close to Isabelle so he could figure her out and learn her secrets. It was a job, his duty, and nothing more. As long as he remembered that, didn't let emotion into the picture, he'd be fine.

He pulled her against him, her breasts pillowed against his chest.

Get close to Isabelle, Lou had said. Well, he was close to her now, wasn't he?

She laid her head against his chest and he moved her around the deck, giving a slight nod to Dimitri, who dimmed the deck lights and made himself scarce. Thank God for the discretion of Realm staffers like Dimitri and the rest of the crew. They asked no questions and followed orders well. The rest of the hands had gone below for the night, exhausted from spending a day in the sun and water.

Now it was just the two of them, the slow, rhythmic music.

And his own wayward thoughts.

He should be thinking about the mission. Instead, he thought about how good she felt in his arms, how soft her skin was, how her hair smelled like strawberries and whether she noticed—or cared—that his dick was hardening against her hip.

He also thought about how tired he was of walking down the road of goodness and light.

“Are you a bad girl, Isabelle?” he asked, voicing his innermost thoughts. Then again, maybe it was wishful thinking.

She tilted her head back and he fought for breath. Silvery light cascaded over her features. Her eyes lit up with swirling, mysterious colors, her full lips quirked with a smile that could only be a product of the devil himself.

“Do you want me to be?”

He was drowning in her, and he didn’t think he wanted to be saved.

“Maybe I do.”

Her tongue snaked out and licked along her bottom lip.

Invitation came knocking, and he answered, dipping down for a taste of the forbidden fruit. He cupped the back of her neck and brushed her lips, savoring the taste of wine and something more exotic. He parted them, pressed deeper, slid his tongue inside, and his world spun. She moaned and he crushed her against him, deepening the kiss.

Isabelle’s arms wound upward, sliding into his hair, her nails digging into his scalp. The pain felt good. It made him feel alive, as if he’d spent years wandering in a fog and she’d just awakened him to wonders he’d only dreamed about.

He splayed his arms across her back and down, memorizing every curve, grasping her buttocks in his hands and squeezing her flesh, drawing her against the rockhard, throbbing part of him.

He pulled back, rocking his pelvis against her. “I want inside you. Now.” He didn’t know whose voice that was. He’d growled that statement like an animal in heat. What was wrong with him?

Isabelle surged upward, biting down hard on his lower lip. He tasted his own blood. Didn’t care.

“Yes. Now,” she said, her own voice hoarse with need.

He scooped her up in his arms and stalked down the hall to her room. She turned the handle and he toed the door open, using his heel to slam it closed. He could see just fine in the dark so he didn’t bother with turning the light on. Instead, he deposited her on her feet near the foot of the bed and took her mouth again, seeking more of her spicy flavor.

He’d bet she’d taste just as good all over. He grasped the straps of her sundress and pulled them over her shoulders, dragging them down her arms, tearing his lips away from her mouth to follow the trail of her scent. Musky, primal, it called to him like a siren beckoning. He kissed her throat, lingering at the wildly pumping pulse at her neck for a few seconds, but compelled to move to her shoulder, her collarbone, then lower as he continued to drag the dress down, baring her to her waist.

Now he cursed the darkness, because he couldn’t see her body, just a silhouette of full breasts. He reached out and cupped the globes in his hands, heard the sound of her indrawn breath. He caressed her nipples, surprised when he skimmed across the cool metal of piercings at the tip of each bud.

“Now that’s sexy,” he murmured. He knew she was wild and untamed, that there was an animal lurking inside Isabelle waiting to break free. And he wanted that part of her all to himself. He flicked the metal and her nipples hardened under his thumbs.

“Yes, touch me,” she said, her voice like smoke, intoxicating him, luring him into the darkness.

Dalton was lost, knew he should walk away, play this game a different way. He was too close to the fire, but he couldn't resist. It was as if something compelled him—a drug to a junkie desperately needing that next fix. He sensed doom and destruction, yet he couldn't turn away from Isabelle now if his life depended on it.

He had a feeling the course he took now would forever alter his destiny. He didn't give a shit. He wanted Isabelle naked and underneath him.

He stripped the dress all the way off, then shucked out of his clothes. She reached out and touched him.

“Your hands are hot,” he said.

“Your body is hot.” She reached for him, encircled the throbbing part of him desperate to be inside her, and began to stroke, taking his breath away as she expertly wound her hand around his thickness, sliding her thumb over the crest and cradling his balls in her other hand. When she dropped to her knees and pressed her lips to him, his knees almost buckled.

No. Yes. Oh, hell yes.

He grasped her hair and wound it around his fist, tightening it, pulling her hair as she wove a magic spell with her lips and tongue, taking him nearly to the edge.

But he wasn't going there. He jerked her up by her hair. “Stand up.”

Darkness filtered the edges of his mind, a violence he could barely control. He pushed Isabelle against the wall, lifting one of her legs and settling it over his hip as he drove into her with one hard thrust. She cried out and he absorbed it with his mouth, kissing her hard, plunging his tongue inside, fucking her mouth the way he did her body.

She raked her nails down his back in answer to his violent thrusts, groaning against him, gripping his body in a way that made it hard to control. Explosive passion warred with the darkness enveloping him until he couldn't hold back any longer. He set it free—on himself, on Isabelle, who

seemed to revel in the darker side of him, absorbing it and giving it back to him, biting and scratching him as he powered inside her, not with tenderness, but with force. She didn't balk, didn't cry; she took, accepted, and delighted in the way he fucked her.

"Yes. More!" she cried. He felt her tighten around him, her body claiming his as she growled out his name in climax.

The fury of her passion blinded him. Darkness drove him. The tight gripping of her body was his undoing and he went with her, burying his face in her neck and pouring out all he had, shaking and shuddering until he had nothing left.

Afterward, spent, sweating, and glad this time for the darkness, he felt her slacken against him. He picked her up and carried her to the bed, pulled down the covers and laid her down.

She hadn't said a word. Had he hurt her? Did she regret?

He searched her face, his eyes adjusting enough to the darkness to see her eyes were closed. He waited, but she didn't move at all. She was out cold. He sat on the edge of the bed and raked his hands through his hair.

Fuck. What had he just done? Even worse, what had he just unleashed?

He'd allowed that darkness within him, the violent, sinister side, to come out and play.

So much for romancing her. So much for seduction. Hell, he hadn't even been nice about it. He'd taken. Violently. Shame washed over him. He wanted to run, to hide. But wasn't that what he'd been doing for years?

He dropped his chin to his chest, knowing it was no use to wish he could change things. This hadn't been the first time it had happened, it had just been a very long time since he'd allowed it.

With Isabelle, it had been easy. But he couldn't blame her for it. He was responsible. And now that it had happened, he had to make use of it. Which

made him feel even worse, if that was possible. But he had to do what he'd come here to do.

"Isabelle." He shook her shoulder, testing her. "Isabelle, wake up."

Nothing. He tried a couple more times, and she didn't move. She was out. A long day and enough alcohol and she was exhausted. She wouldn't wake for a while.

Perfect.

He stood and looked around the room, not wanting to chance turning on a light, though he didn't think even that would rouse her.

He searched every part of the room, taking his time, looking through each drawer and the closet, until he found the box. She hadn't hidden it well at all. Then again, she probably wasn't expecting anyone to go hunting for it.

The lock was easy to pick, and he grabbed the book Isabelle had locked in there. He locked the box back up and put it back in the closet, then dressed and left the room, leaving the door unlocked.

Once in his room, he turned on the light and opened the book. It didn't take much scanning of pages to realize it was a journal, or diary.

But not Isabelle's diary. It was the journal of Isabelle and Angelique's mother, Monette Deveraux. He leaned back and started reading from the beginning, from the time Monette, a French archaeologist, first began doing her work.

Good thing Dalton could read several languages, since Monette wrote entirely in French. He sat back and flipped through the pages, wanting to get to anything that would help the Realm of Light figure out what was going on with Isabelle and Angelique.

It was only when he got to a certain passage that he sat up, his eyes widening.

I haven't written in a while and it's because I'm not certain how to explain this. It's strange, surreal, almost as if it were an out-of-body experience.

I don't know what happened. He seemed like such a nice man. Seductive, beautiful, with the most unusual eyes I'd ever seen. He took such interest in my work, and we spent days, and nights, talking about my current project. We would have dinner, and he was always so polite. I began to trust him. Perhaps that was my biggest mistake. I have always been too trusting.

He stayed with me for over a month, gaining my confidence—and my love. I knew in my heart he was the one for me. Foolish, foolish woman I was.

We made love in the desert, under the stars. It started out beautifully, but then it went so terribly wrong. Something in his eyes—those eyes that I had found so beautiful—they turned evil—horribly evil. I couldn't stop him. The passion, the terror, I wanted to stop, and yet I didn't want to stop. It was heaven and hell combined. When it was over, I was afraid and I ran from him into the night. He chased me. Then something even worse happened.

Two men interceded. Dressed entirely in robes of black, they fought Ahmed. I was so frightened. I hid so the two men couldn't see me. When they approached, Ahmed changed. His eyes glowed red, he grew fangs and claws—I know what I saw, I'm not insane! He attacked, and the two men in black robes sliced through him with their swords. I smothered a scream, I was so terrified I couldn't even breathe. But instead of Ahmed falling to the ground and bleeding, he simply disappeared in smoke and ash.

I have seen many strange things in my travels. Many unexplained things. Spiritual, demonic, call it what you will. Ahmed was not of this world.

I cowered, afraid to move, to even breathe, certain they would strike me down next. But they left. It was hours later when I could run from

my hiding place.

I never told anyone what I saw.

Now I find myself pregnant with his child.

But what kind of child do I carry? Is it a human child, or, God help me, something else?

I'm so afraid. And I have no one to talk to.

Who would believe me, anyway?

Oh, shit. Dalton swallowed, his throat dry and his head throbbing. He continued to read on, realizing as he did that what he'd just read about had to be Angelique and Isabelle's conception.

The journal entries grew sparse as the years went on. The girls were born, seemed perfectly normal, and Monette seemed relieved. She didn't mention her secret again. She wrote about the girls' childhoods and her own adventures in archaeology. She spoke of their travels, how the girls were educated, but she didn't mention the demons again. Still, he couldn't put the book down, had to know if there was anything else.

He found an entry that stopped him cold.

I worry about Isabelle. I always have, though I've been loath to put it in writing. Now that the girls are adults, I've mentioned it to Angelique. She's noticed, too.

Isabelle has a dark side. A very dark side. Yes, we often disagree on the archaeology part of our work, but it's more than that. I sense there's evil within her—a true, pure evil. I don't think she's ever been aware of it, but I've noticed it since the girls were little. Small things at first. Stealing and lying well beyond harmless children's pranks.

Hurting her sister. Angelique has scars from the fights with Isabelle. I can't recall the number of times I had to pull knives and other sharp objects away from Isabelle's hands. The threats she made, the malevolence in her eyes. What would have happened had I not been there to keep close watch over Isabelle, to prevent potential disaster? There were times I feared she might kill her sister. I never spoke to Angelique about this. I didn't want her to be afraid of Isabelle.

There was a fire once in a bungalow, and I found matches on Isabelle, though she denied starting it. But she'd reeked of smoke. Thank the Lord everyone had escaped the hut that night. I never told anyone I suspected my own daughter. She was only eight years old. What could I do?

There were more events than those I've mentioned here. So many more examples of the darkness within Isabelle. I don't know what to do about it. I've never known what to do about it. I've watched her, praying the evil of their father never surfaces in Isabelle, but I fear that someday it might, that it already has. But as soon as I think Isabelle is lost, she turns on the charm and she's oh so sweet, her innocence shining through. Which is real, the innocence or the darkness? I honestly don't know.

How could this potential evil be so invisible in Angelique and so prevalent in Isabelle? I don't understand. Yet it is what it is.

I will never tell anyone about the girls' parentage, but now that I'm ill, I've asked Angelique to keep watch over her sister. Angelique knows nothing, and I would never burden her with this secret. It would destroy her to know the truth. It would destroy both of them. No one must find out. But I must ask Angelique to protect her sister.

It's all I can do. That, and pray for Isabelle's immortal soul.

God help her. God help them both if any part of their father lives within them.

I love my girls so much. Please, God, save them.

Dalton had to talk to Lou. Now.

“Oh, my God. What are you doing?”

He damn near leaped out of the chair, pivoting around at the sound of Isabelle’s voice.

How long had he been reading? Hours, no doubt. He’d lost track of time, so absorbed in Monette’s journal he hadn’t counted on Isabelle waking up.

Damn brilliant, Dalton.

Her hair disheveled, she’d pulled on the dress she’d worn earlier. Her eyes wide, she stepped into the room and looked down at her mother’s journal, then back up at him.

“Isabelle.” He had no words, didn’t know what to say or how to explain what she saw.

“That’s mine,” she whispered in a ragged voice as she choked back tears.

“I know.”

“How did you find it? I had it locked up.”

“Yes.”

Her gaze narrowed, anguish turning to anger. “You’re not really some rich guy who wants to help me find treasure under the sea, are you?”

He shook his head. He couldn’t avoid this. It was time for the truth. “No, I’m not.”

The tears spilled down her cheeks. She wasn’t shocked anymore. Her gaze narrowed and he could feel her anger from across the room. It lit into him like a cold fury.

“Who the hell are you, Dalton?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ryder held Angie in his arms and listened to her slight moans. Not sex moans, but fitful ones. The kind that signaled bad dreams.

She was sleeping, but not peacefully.

He wasn't sleeping at all. He'd gotten an hour, two at the most, which was all he'd needed. Now he was restless, anxious; he would feel a lot better if he could get up and pace. But he didn't want to risk waking her. She needed the rest.

And he needed to think, to figure out what to do now that they'd crossed the line.

Not that he'd done a lot of resisting. One look at her coming out of the steamy bathroom wrapped in only a towel and he'd been a goner. He'd tried to get across to her that the two of them together was a bad idea. His body had thought it was a great idea, though. And damn if he'd been too tired to argue with either her or his cock.

"No."

He looked down at Angie as she whispered the word. She was frowning. Still asleep, twitching a little, mumbling unintelligible words. She was having one hell of a nightmare.

He knew all about those. He pulled her closer and stroked her hair, wishing he could take the bad dreams away.

From both of them.

Ah, hell. He felt something for her. Desire, definitely. But it was more than that. He didn't want to see her hurt. He didn't even want her to have a bad

dream. She was frowning, and tears had started rolling down her cheeks. Whatever she was dreaming about was making her unhappy. Her chest rose and fell rapidly and she had started to shake.

He couldn't stand this.

"Angie. Wake up, darlin'."

Her eyes shot open with a start and she laid her palm on his chest, lifting her head to stare up at him.

"You were having a bad dream."

She stared at him for a few seconds, then blinked. "Isabelle was in trouble and I couldn't get to her." She wiped away the tears. "Silly dreams."

He drew his hand over her hair. So damn soft. Everything about her was soft. Yet, she was so tough, thinking she had to carry the entire world on her shoulders, do it all on her own. "Are you okay now?"

"Yes." She sat up and turned to face him. "I worry a lot about Izzy."

He propped a pillow behind him and sat facing her. "I can tell."

"The darkness in her concerns me. Especially now that I know the Sons of Darkness may be searching for her. And with what happened to me at the house last night . . . I mean it's obvious I have some kind of skills that aren't exactly . . . normal."

"Yeah, it does." She seemed to accept it. In fact, they hadn't even had time to delve into where she'd gotten those abilities. That was a major talk he wasn't prepared to have with her.

"What if she has those same kinds of powers, Ryder? I'm not exactly a dark soul, and look what I did to that demon. It scares me what she might be capable of. To be honest, I'm even worried about what *I* might be capable of."

He blew out a breath. "I know what it's like to have a dark side, to wonder if you're going to snap any minute."

"You do? How?"

He never talked about his past. So why now, and why with Angie? He'd like to think it was to coax her into revealing something about herself and about her sister, but he knew that was bullshit. Maybe he just felt bad that she felt bad about herself, and about her sister.

"When I was young, my mother disappeared. My father went ballistic. Not that he wasn't already half crazy by then, anyway. The whole town just assumed she'd run off, tired of dealing with a madman for a husband."

"How bad was he?"

"Really bad."

"Alcoholic?"

"That was part of it, but it was more than the alcohol. The old man was on a power trip. I don't think he was right mentally, either. Whether that occurred before or after the war I don't know. I was too young. All I know was that he was an evil sonofabitch for as long as I could remember. He liked hurting people."

"Did he . . . hurt you? Hurt your mother?"

Ryder shrugged. "Yeah."

"Oh, Ryder. I'm so sorry."

"We dealt with it, learned ways around the beatings. If you could get him drunk enough, he'd pass out and then he couldn't hit you. Mom was good at keeping enough liquor in the house to make sure he drank himself into oblivion every night. Over the years, she got smart, I guess."

"Good God. Why didn't she take you and leave him?"

He laughed. “And go where? Small town. No other family. You keep your business to yourself. That’s just the way it works.”

“So she just left you with your father? Even knowing he was mentally unstable?”

He’d never told anyone that part of the story before. “No, she didn’t leave us. Remember when I told you about how we got recruited on the island?”

“To fight demons, right?”

“Yeah. What I didn’t tell you was how we were chosen.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This is kind of hard to explain.”

“I’m reasonably intelligent, Ryder. I’m sure I can follow.”

“The six of us Lou brought to the island? All of us lost our mothers when we were children. So did most of the other hunters who came before us.”

“Lost as in . . . how?”

“Our mothers were taken by demons.” He explained how the Sons of Darkness took human women and used them to breed half-human, half-demon creatures—the hideous hybrids they fought.

She placed her hand over her heart. “Did you all know this?”

“No. None of us did. Not until Lou told us on the island.”

“Oh, my God. What a revelation. So you all spent your lives thinking—what? That your mothers had left the family, or died, or been kidnapped?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

She reached for his leg, squeezed it. “Oh, Ryder, I’m so sorry. You thought your mother abandoned you, left you with your father.”

He shrugged. "It was no big deal."

"Of course it's a big deal. No child wants to feel deserted." She crawled onto his lap and wrapped her arms and legs around him, facing him. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that happened to you."

She leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips. Soft, filled with tenderness. Not sexual in any way.

Damn. He wound his arms around her and pulled her against his chest, content to just hold her. He had to admit, it felt good.

Too good.

Don't show weakness. Emotion. It'll get you killed. Women will break you, boy. Don't love them. They'll knife you in the back and destroy you. All worthless bitches. They should pay. Grind them down under your boot heel. A woman's pitiful screams are the best, son.

He shook his head, obliterating his father's words. The old bastard was always there, would always be there, warning him, filling his head with that sick bullshit.

Even dead, the sonofabitch still haunted him.

The warmth fled and he gently pushed Angelique from his lap. "Anyway, back to what I was saying . . ."

She quirked a brow, but nodded.

"My father was a military man. Came back from the war hardened. Not that he didn't go in that way, but something changed in him after. Made him even worse than he was before, my mom told me. He had no love in him, no warmth. Not for my mother and sure as hell not for me."

"Do you have any idea what happened to him during the war?"

"No. Don't think it really mattered. He was born that way, I think. Going to war just made it worse. PTSD or something."

“I’m sure it was hard on both of you.”

He shrugged. “My mom had plenty of love to give me. She tried to shield me from the old man as best she could. And my dad stayed out of the house a lot, either working the farm or in town at one of the bars. It wasn’t until Mom disappeared that things got bad.”

“How bad was it for you after she disappeared?”

“He toughened me, at least that’s what he thought he was doing,” Ryder said with a quirk of his lips. “He was so pissed when she disappeared. Said she left him with a kid who was worth nothing because she’d coddled me for eight years. So he taught me to work the farm, taught me about guns and warfare. When I got older, I learned his moods and when to stay out of his way.”

There were things he’d never tell her, would never tell anyone. His father was one sick bastard. Ryder was lucky he’d run off when he did. Lucky to still be alive. Lucky someone had killed his old man in a bar fight before his father hurt anyone else. There were times Ryder could have killed him, wished he’d had the guts. But he’d just been a kid. Now? He wouldn’t blink about doing it. But back then he’d lacked the courage.

Angelique grasped his hand. He tried to pull away, but she clung tight. He decided to let it be, figuring she needed it more than he did.

“I decided in order to survive it, I needed to become just like him. Hard, mean, a tough sonofabitch. So I did.”

“But that’s not who you are,” she said.

“You don’t really know that, do you? You don’t know me at all, Angie. You don’t know what I’ve done, where I’ve been.” *How many I’ve killed. How much I enjoyed it.* Enjoyed inflicting that final blow, just like his father.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. But I know what you’re capable of. And you have the capacity for tenderness, for protectiveness and for caring. Did your father?”

For some reason it pleased him that she thought those things about him. “I don’t remember. I guess he must have at one time, or my mother wouldn’t have married him. Maybe something went haywire in his head, or some kind of anger caught hold of him and wouldn’t let go.”

She shifted, sat on her heels, and leaned forward enough to clasp her palm to his cheek. “You’re afraid you’ll end up just like him.”

He stared up at her. “Do you dabble in psychology when you’re not digging up bones?”

She let out a soft laugh. “No. It’s pretty easy to follow your train of thought.”

“So, you think I’m simple.”

Now she threw her head back and laughed hard. “Ryder, there’s nothing simple about you. You’re one of the most complex men I’ve ever known. You’re like an intriguing puzzle. Trying to figure you out is like trying to find buried treasure. You know it’s there somewhere, just waiting to be discovered, but you just can’t decipher the damn map. That’s what I like most about you.”

“Keep saying those things about me and I might get a swelled head.”

“Really. Let’s see.” She pulled back the covers and reached for him, wrapping both hands around his quickly hardening flesh.

“Angie.”

He’d said her name the last time, but that was when he’d warned her to stop. Now it was a guttural plea to continue.

And maybe it was because he didn’t want to continue their conversation. He didn’t want to talk about his past, about his father. He’d done it to make her feel better, but it dredged up things he didn’t want to remember.

Now he wanted to forget, and being with Angie made him forget everything else.

He lifted his hips, pumping into her hand, watching every stroke in the hazy darkness of the dimly lit room.

She celebrated his body with slow, measured movements, worshiping him with her hands, and then her mouth, bending over him, her hair splayed out over his thighs and stomach.

She was a goddess, a temptress, and he gave himself over to her, releasing the last of his restraint and letting her have everything. He drowned in the softness of her hair, the lush heat of her mouth, her tongue, the way she captured his senses and completely owned him. When he released, she didn't let go, taking him all in, gripping his thighs when he bucked against her and groaned.

Damn.

If she was a demon, then he'd just taken a step over onto the dark side, and loved every minute of it.

She raised her head, smiled at him, and licked her lips. His cock twitched, still alive and eager to feel her heat surrounding him.

"Come here, darlin'."

She climbed onto his lap again, this time straddling his legs and wrapping her legs around his back, her sex positioned over his throbbing cock. She laid her palm on his chest and he shifted, sliding down the pillow and grasping her hips.

"Ride me."

She did, mounting him and covering her body over his. Her eyes drifted closed when she eased down on top of him, engulfing him in a tight vise. His balls quivered as she seated herself fully on his thighs. Buried deep, he was completely connected to her via their bodies and their eyes.

Oh, man, she was beautiful. He wished he'd turned on the light next to the bed so he could see her body as she rocked back and forth against him, but

he saw enough. The way her breasts moved along with the swaying motions of her body, the softness of her hair as it fell over her shoulders when she leaned forward to plant her hands on his chest, the stark look of surprise and delight on her face when he lifted his hips—yeah, he saw plenty, and felt even more.

He swept her hair away from her face and cradled her face in his hands, pulling her forward, needing the contact of her lips against his. The first touch ignited a spark from his tongue to his balls, a shock of heat that burned him from the inside out.

That flame continued to grow as she increased her movements, digging her nails into her shoulders. He tangled his fingers in her hair and held on tight as she rocked them both, raising up and sliding back down on him until he felt his spine tingling, a rushing wave of climax building that he couldn't hold back.

He pulled his lips from hers, pushed on her shoulders so he could see her face.

“Come on,” he coaxed, holding on to her hip with one hand, directing their movements with an upward stroke. “Let me have it.”

She gasped, moaned, then ground against him, tilting her head back as she let out a cry of delight that made him shudder. She was lost then, climaxing against him, around him, tightening and pulsing, raining her pleasure down on him until he let go inside her with a torrent of his own that left him shaking.

She fell against his chest, her breathing out of control, her hair damp with perspiration. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head, realizing how easy it had been to let her in.

Sex had always been just a physical thing, a momentary gratification of getting his rocks off and easing the tension. Then he walked away.

He'd always walked away. And never once looked back, because he'd never cared. Of course, neither had the women. He'd always chosen women

who weren't in it for a relationship, who only wanted sex. It worked well for both of them that way. They both got what they wanted. Scratch an itch and move on.

It was different with Angie, and he couldn't deny that everything since the beginning had been different with her.

For a guy who'd spent his entire adult life steeling himself against emotional connection, he was doing a piss-poor job avoiding it with Angelique. It was as if he didn't have a choice with her. She was embedded, and he couldn't do anything about it.

The odd thing was, he didn't want to change anything. Dammit, he was enjoying this contact with her, needed it like basic sustenance.

Ryder was a realist. There was no point pretending the emotion didn't exist. It did; he had to accept it.

He cared about her.

But he'd never love her. He knew the limitations, understood just how far he could go. He'd never subject a woman to what his mother had gone through.

And he didn't trust himself enough. He wasn't confident enough to say he wouldn't end up just like his father.

He owed Angie more than that. She deserved more than that.

"Do you have any idea where we're going, or are we going to continue driving aimlessly around the coast?" she asked.

He smiled. That's exactly what he'd been doing. Trying to get his bearings and stay one step ahead of the demons until he figured out a game plan. "You're too damn perceptive. You're not psychic like Shay, are you?"

She rolled off him and sat up, a satisfied smile gracing her face. "Hardly. So what are we going to do?"

He pushed the pillow up against the headboard again. “I’m going to contact Lou, then Dalton. We’ll figure out the next step. What the hell time is it, anyway?”

“About five in the morning.”

He shrugged. “A little early.”

“We could get breakfast first.”

“We could. But right now I’m going to take a shower. Care to join me?”

She looked down between his legs, then met his gaze again, her eyes going smoky. “Now that’s an invitation I can’t refuse.”

“You’re insatiable. You’re going to wear me out. I’ll be worthless.”

She slid off the bed and stretched, thrusting her breasts at him. Maybe she was a demon—a succubus sent to tempt him into selling his soul.

It was working.

“Somehow I think you can handle it, tough guy. I’ll go turn on the shower.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Isabelle couldn't breathe as Dalton held her mother's diary in his hand. The secrets, the things he now knew about her. . . .

The pain was so raw it tore through her lungs, her heart. Embarrassment, rage, and utter terror burned within her. She could barely form words; she didn't know where to start.

She'd been had. Dalton looked back at her, his face a mask revealing nothing. Tense seconds had ticked by and so far he hadn't replied to her question, so she asked him again.

"Who *are* you?"

Anger was a shield, so much better than dissolving into tears and crumpling on the floor. She wanted to die. Or wanted to run into his arms and beg him to help her understand what he'd read in her mother's diary.

He couldn't help her, though. No one could.

He stood and picked up the diary but didn't move toward her. She wanted to snatch her mother's journal from his hand and jump off the boat, do anything she could to get away from him. But instead she stood her ground, firmly refusing to budge. She had to know.

"Isabelle, don't panic. Don't be angry."

She let out a laugh, though the situation was anything but funny. "You have a hell of a lot of nerve telling me how to act or feel. You stole what was mine. Something private. You read my diary, Dalton! Is that even your name?"

"Yes."

At least he had the decency to look ashamed, though it gave her little comfort. “Is that the only thing you told me that’s the truth?”

He leaned back against the desk. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Fighting back tears, she nodded and held out her hand. “Give me the diary. It belonged to my mother.”

He held firm to it. “Not until you listen to me.”

“There’s nothing you could tell me, no explanation you could make up, that I’m remotely interested in hearing. Now give me the diary.”

Determined to get the journal back from him, she started toward him.

“I hunt demons for a living, Isabelle.”

She stopped. “What?”

“Demons do exist. I’ve seen them. I’ve killed them.”

She felt dizzy, nauseous. Was he making this up? “What are you saying?”

“I’m here to protect you. Demons are looking for you. They want to use you, to hurt you.”

Her airway was closing; pinpricks of tiny lights danced in front of her eyes. Oh, God, she was losing it. She tried to suck in air, but she was doing it too fast. She hurried toward the bed and sat, doubling over. “I’m going to be sick.”

A cool hand swept her hair away from her neck and palmed her nape. “Breathe normally. Slow down. You’re hyperventilating.”

“Don’t . . . touch me.” She tried to bat his hand away, but dammit, it felt good—calming. She was so pathetic. Angry and sick to her stomach. She felt both violated and needy, yet desperate to be held and comforted. She wanted this nightmare to go away. She wanted it not to have happened.

Once she got her breathing under control, she felt less like passing out, though the sick feeling in her stomach hadn't gone away. She sat upright, shouldering his arm away, refusing to acknowledge the tenderness of his touch.

She'd thought they had a connection, something that went deeper than anything she'd ever experienced with a man. He got her, understood her. Or so she'd thought.

You are so dumb, Izzy.

The mattress gave as he sat next to her. "Isabelle, let me explain this to you."

"You violated my privacy," she shot back. "You violated me. There's nothing to explain."

"You're right. I did take what was yours. And I'm sorry. I had to know about you."

She turned her head to glare at him. "Couldn't you have asked?"

"Would you have told me what was in your mother's journal?"

She looked away again. No. She wouldn't have. No one needed to know what she was. She didn't know what she was. Not really. Only that she wasn't . . . normal. If what her mother said was true.

Could it be true? She hadn't even discussed it with Angelique, too afraid her sister would look at her with condemnation in her eyes. Hadn't she always been less than Angelique? Hadn't she been trying to prove herself equal to or better than her sister her entire life?

One good sister, one bad. How could that have happened? They were twins. Shouldn't they be exactly alike? Why wasn't Mother here so she could talk to her about it?

She blinked to fight the tears, needing distance and a place where she could be alone. "Go away, Dalton. Take me back to the dock. I want off this

boat.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can. I’m demanding you return me to the dock.”

“No.”

She stood, wobbling a little, cursing the alcohol she’d consumed earlier. Steadying herself, she faced him. “Are you kidnapping me?”

“I’m protecting you.”

“Bullshit.” She stared at the journal, trying to determine if it was worth trying to grab for it, then make a run. She was a good swimmer. Maybe she could get to the small boat anchored to the yacht.

Stupid, Izzy. You’d never make it. And the diary would be ruined.

Not that she ever wanted to read it again. Maybe it should be destroyed. Wasn’t it bad enough Dalton had found and read it? She should have burned it after she found it.

“If you’d calm down for five minutes and let me explain what my mission is here—”

“Oh. I’m a mission now. So fucking me was part of your mission?”

He dragged his hand through his hair. “No, it wasn’t.”

“Then what was it?”

His gaze never wavered. “Really great sex.”

Touché. What did she expect? Romance? Declarations of undying love and devotion? She barely knew him, and she’d gotten exactly what she’d asked for. No-strings sex. So why did her stomach twist at the word?

“You’re right. It was sex. Nothing more than that.” She wanted to lie and tell him it wasn’t even very good sex just so she could hurt him, but she couldn’t. It had been phenomenal.

“Isabelle, I’m sorry. I’ve done this all wrong. I shouldn’t have gotten involved with you. It wasn’t my intent to hurt you.”

He took a step forward; she took one back.

“You haven’t hurt me. To hurt me I’d have to care. The only way you hurt me was to take and read my mother’s journal. And I want it back. It means something to me.”

“I promise I’ll give it back to you, but there’s vital information in here that my people need to see.”

She let her eyelids drift shut for a moment, imagining the worst—her reputation, her entire world crashing down upon her as everything she had built was ruined when word of what was in her mother’s journal got out.

“This isn’t for national media consumption, Isabelle. The people who will see this information are discreet, under the radar.”

“Who?”

“Sit down.”

She hesitated. But part of her was curious enough to want to know. Maybe Dalton was delusional. He did say something about hunting demons for a living. Then again, maybe he was the one person who could help her figure out who and what she really was.

She was torn, both hating and needing Dalton. She needed someone to help her. She didn’t want it to be him. She wanted it to be him.

Could she possibly be more screwed up?

She moved back to the edge of the bed and sat, staring up at him.

“I work for an organization known as the Realm of Light. We hunt demons. Specifically, we hunt the Sons of Darkness, powerful demon Lords under the direction of the great evil one.”

“The great evil one. You mean like Lucifer?”

Dalton shrugged. “Or a manifestation of the same. You can call it what you will. The Sons of Darkness and the Realm of Light have been at war for centuries, both having unique powers. The Realm of Light is headed by Keepers, who have the power of insight, a way of knowing what the demons are doing and how to fight them.”

“And you’re one of these Keepers,” she said, trying to keep an open mind, especially after what she’d read in her mother’s journal.

“No, I’m not. I work for Louis, one of the Keepers. Lou directs several demon hunters. I’m one of them.”

“So you were sent to find out if I’m a demon and to—what? Kill me?”

He shook his head, his lips lifting in that smile she’d found so devastating earlier. “No. Protect you. You’re not a full demon, Isabelle. I don’t really know what you are. Obviously if what your mother’s diary says is true, you’re half demon, half human.”

“Doesn’t that still make me dangerous to your people?”

“Not necessarily. We actually have a couple half demons as hunters. They make great allies because they have an inner sense of how demons think and move.”

There were others? Like . . . her? She shook her head, refusing to believe any of this. “And you think I’m one of them. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you but I don’t think or act like a demon. I’m human, I feel human, and I act human.”

Again that smart-assed grin. “That’s what they said at first, too. Sometimes there’s a catalyst for the demon behavior to appear.”

“Such as?”

He shrugged. “Different things for different people.”

“I think you’re totally full of shit, Dalton. You’re playing me, trying to make me doubt myself.” As if she didn’t already have enough doubts and questions knocking around in her brain.

“What about your mother’s diary?”

“Nonsensical ramblings. I don’t think she really knows what happened to her that night, or what she saw. I’ve never felt different. I’m not a demon.”

“Derek and Nic said the same thing at first. You’ve got to be brought into the Realm, Isabelle. For your own safety. If the Sons of Darkness find you—and they are looking for you, trust me—they’ll use you.”

Now it was her turn to smirk. “Isn’t that exactly what your people are trying to do? Use me?”

“No. We’re trying to save you.”

She’d heard enough. Though she wanted to trust in someone, to let Dalton help her, she couldn’t take the chance. She had to do this on her own. “I don’t need saving, but thanks for the offer. Now give me the journal and take me back to the dock.”

“You don’t believe anything I told you, do you?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Not really.”

“I understand self-preservation, Isabelle. I really do. But you’ve got to listen to me.”

“No, Dalton, I don’t. Now give me back the journal.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do that. Not right now, anyway. Eventually you’ll get it back. Come with me to meet Lou, the Keeper I work for. He’ll explain better than I can.”

Right. And no doubt keep her under lock and key like some experimental monkey. The thought of it made her stomach tighten, fear snaking its way into her nerve endings.

Wasn't it bad enough what she thought of herself ? What would those other people think of her?

Right now she was free. She intended to keep it that way. "No. I want off this boat. Now. How many ways do I need to say it? Do I need to call the local authorities to board this boat and have you arrested?"

"You can't do that."

"I can, and I will if you don't give me another choice."

He inhaled, let out a sigh, and moved toward her, the book in his hand. Was he really going to make it this easy? Somehow she knew he wasn't.

"I'm sorry. More than I can say," he said, holding the book out toward her.

She reached for it, but he grabbed her wrist, hauling her against his chest.

"You're stubborn."

She tilted her head back, angry at herself for being stupid enough to believe he'd hand over the book and let her go, especially since he'd already stated he wouldn't.

"You're an ass."

"Yes, I am. But you're still coming with me."

She struggled, kicking at him, but with bare feet she really could do no damage against his muscular body. And her upper body was pinned, since he'd wrapped an arm tight around her chest.

He moved to the phone at the side of his bed. He pushed one number, obviously the ship's captain, because he gave an order and directions to get moving.

They were headed to Sicily, not back to Malta.

Which made no difference to her. Once they reached land, she had a chance to get away. And she could get lost more easily in Sicily.

She stopped struggling, figuring she'd save her energy and bide her time, and soon enough she'd get away from Dalton.

With her mother's diary.

She was smart and resourceful, and while she'd made a critical error in trusting Dalton, it could have happened to anyone. He flashed his money and power—his friendliness and a chance at making a connection with someone—at her when she'd really needed it, and she'd been stupid enough to fall for his lies.

Remorse hit her straight in the belly as the boat headed away from the dive spot. She'd been so close to finding what she'd been looking for.

Then again she'd spent her entire life searching for . . . something. She'd never been able to figure out what that “something” was.

Maybe it hadn't been treasure after all.

Maybe it had been her identity.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They were loading up the car when Ryder got a phone call.

Angelique froze and tried to listen to the voice on the other end. When Ryder hung up, he turned to her.

“Dalton’s bringing Isabelle. We’ll meet them.”

“I thought you said it was a bad idea to get us together?”

“Change of plans.”

Weird, but she wasn’t going to question it. Not if the end result was seeing her sister. “Okay. Where?”

“Near Catania. On the northeast side.”

Angelique zinged with trepidation. “Is Isabelle all right?”

“She’s fine.”

They climbed in the car and Ryder headed out. They were a few hours away, and she couldn’t contain her excitement at seeing her sister again. But she wondered why now, and especially when Ryder was so adamant earlier about keeping them apart.

“Something is wrong. What is it?”

“Your sister is pissed. And something happened. We figure you can help.”

“What is she upset about?”

“Don’t know. Something about your mother’s diary and some secrets your mom wrote in there. Dalton found it and read it. He didn’t go into detail, just said there’s some serious shit in it.”

“Secrets? Secrets about what?”

“He didn’t say.”

Dammit. She didn’t know Mother had kept a diary. And how did Isabelle get hold of it? And more important, why wouldn’t Izzy tell her about it? If there was something upsetting in the diary, why wouldn’t her sister confide in her?

She needed to talk to Isabelle as soon as possible. And see that diary. She was dying to know what was in it that was so earth-shattering.

After several hours in the car—an utterly silent drive, since her mind was preoccupied with questions—they arrived at a charming city on the outskirts of Catania. She barely had a moment to bask in the stunning verdant sloping hillsides, crystal blue water, and ancient, Baroque architecture before Ryder careened around a corner and headed up a narrow path, effectively blocking her view of the gorgeous city.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Up.”

“So not helpful.” Especially since she couldn’t see anything except steep, narrow road and clustered housing.

She finally had to stop trying to look around because the road really was heading . . . up. She was plastered against the back of the seat and could do nothing but lean her head against the neck rest and look to the sky, which seemed to be getting closer with every mile.

Ryder finally cleared the small road and tightly packed houses and turned left where the road began to curve. They were still going up and at a steep pace. They seemed to be headed toward a magnificent-looking castle ruin.

“Are we going there?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

Damn. Her blood stirred, excitement fueling her veins with a rush of adrenaline. Despite her worry for her sister, the archaeologist in her was chomping at the bit for a chance to explore the castle.

“Are you sure we can get on the property? We’re not going to be breaking in or anything, are we?”

“Trust me, we won’t be breaking in.”

The castle was isolated at the top of a hill, nothing around it but sheer cliffs—a perfect point of protection against ancient enemies. By the time Ryder slowed down and nearly crawled the car through the narrow stone wall entrance, Angelique wanted to leap out and run to the front door. She was dying to get inside. Her love for ancient ruins had taken front and center in her mind.

“This is breathtaking,” she said as he drove the long curved path—more crushed stones than road, really—that led them to the thick door.

“Uh-huh.” He put the car in park.

She turned to look at him. “Oh, come on. Even you have to admit this castle is pretty cool.”

“It’ll do as a point of protection against anyone trying to get us. But then again, you and I both know demons can get at us from anywhere. So we’ll see.”

“Ugh. You’re no fun. Where’s your love of history?”

“I never had a love of history. Ask Mrs. McCann.”

“Who’s Mrs. McCann?”

“My high school World History teacher. I got a C minus.”

“C minus? You suck.”

He snorted and got out of the car. Angelique did the same, helping him unload. As they did, the front door opened and she whirled around, hoping they wouldn't find demons standing there.

Instead, a familiar face greeted her. At least she thought she'd seen him before. Deadly handsome, with short, spiky dirty blond hair and an Australian accent.

“ 'Bout time you got here, mate.”

Ryder looked up and quirked a smile. “Hey, Trace. How are you enjoying Italy?”

Trace wrinkled his nose. “Not enough desert. Too much culture. Too pretty. Needs more dust.”

Ryder laughed and turned to Angelique. “You remember Trace?”

She nodded. “Yes. From our time in Australia.”

“I remember you, too, gorgeous. Still as pretty as ever.”

“Don't even think about it,” Ryder grumbled, brushing past Trace as they made their way into the hall of the castle.

“Staked your claim already, did you?” Trace asked, lifting the bag from Angelique's hands.

“No. Just . . . don't.”

“Oooh, I think he's got a thing for you, honey,” Trace said to her with a quick wink.

“Fuck off, Trace,” Ryder said with a low warning tone to his voice.

Angelique listened to the interplay between the two with great interest. So much that she initially brushed past the fact that while the fortress was

ancient and crumbling on the outside, everything on the inside was polished and new, from gleaming wood floors to leather furniture and state-of-the-art electronics spread around the great room off to the right. It was a geek's paradise in there.

How strange. Who lived here? Who owned this castle?

"I could feel the testosterone level rising in here, and figured Ryder must be back."

Angelique turned around as a very tall woman with long, curling black hair walked in. Another of the demon hunters.

"Mandy, right?" Angelique asked.

She grinned. "Yeah, and you're Angie. Or is it Angelique?"

"Either will do just fine."

"Ryder," Mandy said as he walked by.

"Mandy. Everything secure?"

"Tight."

"Who's here?"

Trace stepped up next to Mandy. "Just us. Lou sent us. The rest of them are on a hunt. Damn demons are making strange appearances all over the country, so we've been split up. Oh, and a Keeper."

Ryder arched a brow. "Not Lou?"

"No. Local guy. Michael. He just got here, too. Come on in and I'll introduce you."

They moved into the large entryway and a man dressed all in black walked out of the great room.

Wow. One of the things Angelique had remarked about in Australia was that all the demon hunters were gorgeous. She hadn't expected a Keeper to be the same way. She thought they were . . . older. This one wasn't.

"This is Michael," Mandy said. "He's one of the Keepers of the Realm of Light."

He didn't look old-world at all. Extremely tall, powerfully built, with wavy black hair and stormy gray eyes. Full lips and an aristocratic nose. He was damn gorgeous.

He walked toward her and held out his hand to shake hers. "*Bonjour, Angelique.*"

"*Bonjour, Michael,*" she said.

"*Comment allez-vous?*" he asked.

"*Merci, bien. Et tu?*" She was surprised when he began conversing with her in French. They carried on a casual conversation about their trip and the weather for a few moments, until Ryder cleared his throat.

"Sorry," Michael said, turning to him. "You must be Ryder." They shook hands, and Ryder looked annoyed.

Angelique couldn't hold back her smile. Maybe Ryder was a little jealous. She liked that.

"Lou has brought me up to speed on what's been going on. I'm hoping I can be of some help. He's sorry he can't be here, but the demons are keeping them busy throughout the country. He's working with your people and mine."

"The demons are hunting for the black diamond," Angelique said.

"Probably," Michael said. "Or for the diamond and Isabelle. And you."

"They don't appear to have had any problems finding me," she replied.

Trace frowned at Ryder. “You’ve had skirmishes?”

“Yeah. With some new forms of demons. They appear out of a mist and can’t be killed with our traditional weaponry.”

“Sounds like we need a debriefing,” Mandy said. “I’m cooking in the kitchen. Figured you’d be hungry. Let’s talk and eat.”

Angelique’s stomach rumbled at the mention of food. “You’re saving my life,” she said to Mandy.

“Yeah,” Trace said from behind Angelique. “She cooks *and* kills demons. I might have to marry her.”

“In your dreams,” Mandy quipped.

They ate, and Ryder and Angelique filled them in on what had transpired with the demons they’d battled.

“Lou told me about the new breed of demons. We’re working on designing new weaponry for you to use,” Michael said.

“I think you’re kind of young for a Keeper,” Mandy said, stating what many of them probably thought, too.

Michael smiled. “My father was a Keeper—one of the few who defied the Sons of Darkness when they began slaughtering the wives and children of Keepers in order to dwindle our numbers. Because the female demons were sterile and could not reproduce, they thought in order to keep the war between us balanced, they would make sure our side couldn’t reproduce, either. But my father refused to let the Sons of Darkness win. When his first wife and child were killed, he remarried. After I was born, he hid me away, teaching me and training me in the ways of the Keepers.”

“And you survived,” Angelique said.

Michael nodded. “I survived. There are more of us around than the Sons of Darkness know. And we’re stronger now than ever before.”

“So the Keepers are . . . magical?” Angelique asked.

“We each have certain gifts that are passed down from generation to generation.”

“Cool,” Trace said. “Lou seems to know where demons are. He senses them.”

“All Keepers can,” Michael said. “It’s useful.”

“Understatement,” Ryder said. “We could all use that ability.”

“Trust me. I’m here to help. One thing at a time. The Sons of Darkness have their agenda, and we have ours. First is to take care of those under our protection. The second is to deal with the black diamond, with Angelique’s assistance, of course.”

All eyes turned to her. Right. She had promised Ryder she’d give that up if he reunited her with Isabelle.

Then again, she hadn’t seen her sister yet, had she?

“Is Isabelle coming?”

Michael nodded. “She should be here within the day.”

“Then we’ll talk about the black diamond after she gets here. I have to make sure she’s safe first.”

The black diamond was her bargaining chip. And she wasn’t going to give it up until she had her sister back.

Ryder glared at her, and she knew why. Earlier, she’d offered to lead him to the black diamond in exchange for his taking her to Isabelle.

Things hadn’t quite worked out that way, though, so now the plan had changed. And if he was going to be pissed off about that, so be it.

Izzy had to come first. At least right now.

Ryder could understand that, couldn't he?

"They're gathering," Tase said with a satisfied smile.

Aron nodded. "As are we."

Tase looked around at his brothers. "Humans are stupid. The Realm of Light is scattered."

"Our demons have done well," Badon said. "We've kept the Realm splintered, fighting throughout the country. The Realm is busy watching the demons; their hunters are forced into smaller groups in order to keep up."

"It's just as I planned it," Tase said, rising from his place at the table and looking over them all. "Soon we will have it all. The black diamond, and the Queen of Darkness. All it takes is knowing we have the power and the knowledge. And most importantly, the strength. Are they ready?" he asked Badon.

"They are perfect," Badon answered with a slight bow of his head. "More and more coming to us every day, desperate for what we have to offer. Apparently immortality, supreme strength, and perfection are quite a lure."

Tase's lips curled upward. "This domination will be so easy. I'm almost sorry there won't be much of a battle."

"I would not underestimate the Realm of Light, Lord Tase."

Tase shot a lick of fire toward his brother, Kal. Kal was normally silent and generally went along with the other Lords, but he was never one to stand at Tase's side; Tase knew he'd have difficulty with Kal. Kal didn't even flinch as the fire singed his skin. Of course Kal would welcome the pain.

"I never underestimate them. I simply undervalue them. They mean nothing. Ben and Bart were weak. They let Lou and his demon hunters walk all over them. They thought with emotion. We know better. Our power is stronger now, and we will defeat them this time."

“I still think you are unwise to believe this will be an easy battle. Humans are known to fight with heart, to use their very souls in their efforts to secure victory. They will not go down easily,” Kal argued.

“They are nothing but flies on shit,” Badon said. “Tase is right. With the humans we are turning now, our power is great. Our force is stronger than ever. The Realm stands no chance.”

“Those words have been spoken before. And still, here we are, no closer to our goal than we’ve been for centuries. Do not count out the Realm yet, my Lords, or you will regret it.”

“Do you stand with us, Kal, or against us?” Tase asked, fury making his flames expand. The others pushed away from the table, their icy countenances unable to bear his heat. He didn’t care, his ire was so strong.

Kal, however, didn’t move. “I am always with you, but I will always speak my mind, as you well know . . . *brother*.”

Kal would have to be dealt with. Insurrection within the Sons of Darkness would never do. But now was not the time. Tase had worked hard to obtain his position as leader, and the great evil one was watching . . . always watching. Judging him to see how he handled even the slightest uprising.

“I enjoy your challenges, Kal. I welcome them. And a voice of reason reminding us to be careful is a good thing. Your comments are duly noted. We will not underestimate the Realm of Light. But I think you will be the one surprised when you see how easy it is to crush them under the might of the Sons of Darkness.”

“We shall see, my Lord,” Kal said. “We shall see.”

The group disbanded, and Tase fought to gather his temper, wishing he were empowered to destroy at will. But their Father had not given him such abilities as yet. He would have to prove himself first.

And he would.

When the Realm of Light was destroyed and the Sons of Darkness walked the earth controlling all, the Father would give him supreme control.

And when that day came, the first thing he would do is reduce Kal to a pile of smoking ash.

Rewards and punishments.

Someday, he would be king.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Isabelle did her best to appear calm and patient on the surface, but inside she was fuming.

Dalton had tucked her mother's diary in his back pocket. He hadn't left her side the entire time the yacht had cruised to Sicily. Did he think she was going to jump overboard and try to swim her way to freedom?

Not that the thought hadn't occurred to her. But her head eventually cleared and common sense prevailed. She'd wait until they reached land. Then she'd make a run for it.

The yacht docked off Catania and she was allowed to pack her things. With Dalton standing guard over her, of course. Odd that she'd never found him so imposing—until now.

Of course he'd been damn imposing when he'd thrown her against the wall and made love to her. Her body heated as she remembered his awesome power, the way he mastered her body, took her with such force. At the time she'd welcomed it, needed someone to take her like that. She'd never felt such force, such power coming from one man. With Dalton, she'd felt an equal, the beginnings of a relationship that could be explosive. Cravings had built inside her that she'd never experienced before.

She'd felt such hope, such stirrings. In a short period of time, he had evoked a fierce need in her.

Beyond the physical connection, there had been a meeting of their minds. They were so similar in many ways. He understood her, or at least had seemed to.

No, he *had* understood her. She felt it deep inside. No amount of acting on his part could have fooled her.

She shuddered, trying to erase the vivid images of the two of them together that still made her body burn.

Hot tears pricked her eyes. She blinked them back, hating that weakness, hating him. He'd used her. She'd always chosen the wrong men. Angelique had always told her she had no sense where men were concerned, that she was a lousy judge of character.

Once again, Angie had been right.

So why did her body still yearn for Dalton? Why did she think Dalton could actually help explain this mess to her, that he might be able to help her? How could she yearn with hope, feel the need to reach out for a man who had betrayed her? What the hell was wrong with her? He was the damn enemy.

They took the launch from the yacht to the dock, and climbed off. Isabelle noticed that only she and Dalton disembarked. The rest of the crew stayed on board the yacht and the mini headed back toward it. From what she could see, it looked like the crew was making ready to take off. Without the two of them.

So they wouldn't be going back to the yacht. Then again, the boat probably didn't even belong to Dalton, since everything about him was one big lie.

That meant this would be her chance to make a getaway, to get lost in the crowd and disappear.

What she'd do after that was uncertain. All she knew was she had to make a grab for her mother's diary and get as far away from Dalton as possible.

Being near him clouded her judgment, devastated her senses. She couldn't think clearly with him around.

She couldn't trust him or anything he'd told her. She wanted nothing to do with him and his supposed band of demon hunters.

“I’m hungry,” she said, motioning to the group of vendors along the crowded street ahead.

Dalton frowned. “There was plenty of food on the yacht this morning.”

“I wasn’t hungry then. I am now.”

He lifted his shoulders in an exasperated sigh, then checked his watch. “All right. Let’s go. I’ve arranged for a car, so we need to get back to the pickup point in ten minutes.”

He held on to her arm and maneuvered her past the buyers and vendors in the marketplace. The street was narrow and with carts and people, that meant a tight squeeze. Perfect.

“There’s a coffee cart up ahead with rolls. Let’s head to that one. I really need an espresso,” she said, trying to sound eager and focused only on food.

He nodded and took her hand, leading the way.

It couldn’t have gone better. With him in the lead, they were single file. She could see the diary in his back pocket, they were jam-packed in with people crushing against them, and now was her chance. Her pulse raced, her heart pounding as she plotted her move.

She lifted the diary, at the same time jerking her hand from his, pivoted, and took a sharp left into the crowd, pushing her way past vendors and buyers who yelled and gestured to her in angry Italian.

She wanted to apologize for her rudeness, but she couldn’t. Her life, her freedom was at stake. And she knew Dalton was right on her heels. She didn’t have the foggiest idea where she was headed; she only knew she was literally running for her life.

Trying to stay within the relative safety of the dense crowd, she weaved in and out, turning east and ducking down, hoping Dalton couldn’t see her. She jerked off her sweater so maybe he wouldn’t be able to spot her by her

clothing, then continued to stay low, slipping between two fruit carts generously populated with customers.

The vendors gestured at her wildly and cursed in Italian for her to get out of there, no doubt thinking she was in there to steal from them. Isabelle ignored them, practically on her hands and knees now as she moved through the back of their cart area and out the other side. She hoped they wouldn't shout for the local authorities that a thief was amongst them. That would only alert Dalton to her whereabouts.

She heard nothing and the vendors stopped yelling. Maybe they realized she wasn't stealing anything. Taking a moment to pause and turn, checking her surroundings, she didn't spot Dalton anywhere. Still, she wasn't about to stop. She pushed on, keeping her brisk pace, but this time only at a walk so she wouldn't draw suspicion to herself. Still, she stayed within the morning crowds until she found a dark side street. She ducked up the street and was greeted with mercifully cool shade.

Having been to Catania before, it only took her a moment to gather her bearings. This was a business section. All she had to do was take a taxi to the train station nearby and get the hell out of here—disappear so Dalton could never find her.

She kept to the shadows, sticking close to the buildings, especially near the alleys in case she had to duck down one if she spotted Dalton.

“Isabelle.”

She froze, turning quickly at the sound of her name.

It wasn't Dalton. A tall, well-dressed man stepped out of an alley.

She didn't recognize him, but he seemed friendly enough, smiling as he motioned to her. Pinned to the wall of a building, she wasn't about to budge. For all she knew he could be working for Dalton.

“Who are you?” She clutched her bag closer, prepared to tear off in the opposite direction.

“I’ve been sent by your sister. Angelique has been looking for you. Hurry, we need to get out of here.”

Relief flooded her. She’d never been happier to hear her sister’s name. “Angie sent you?”

“Yes. I saw you get off the yacht. I’ve been searching everywhere for you. Your sister is frantic.” He looked down one end of the street, then the other, then back at her, motioning with his hand. “Let’s go. Hurry. Before he catches up.”

He knew her sister’s name, and that Dalton was chasing her. Should she trust him? What if it was a setup?

She paused, uncertain and yet desperate. Dalton would find her any minute.

“Please, Isabelle. Your sister is waiting.”

“Where?”

“Izzy, come on!”

Angelique! She heard her sister’s voice around the corner. It was Angie’s voice, wasn’t it?

Isabelle didn’t feel that connection, that warmth she usually felt when she was near her sister. Yet she so wanted it to be her. “Angelique is here?”

He nodded. “Yes. Now hurry.”

Where else did she have to go? She was desperate. And for once in her life, she really needed Angelique.

She pushed off the wall and moved toward him. He slid around the corner and disappeared into the alley.

Isabelle started to follow, but as soon as she got to the corner of the building someone grabbed her arm. She gasped and looked up to find Dalton’s face glaring down at her.

No! “Let me go! My sister is here.”

Dalton shook his head. “No, she’s not.”

“I heard her.”

“You heard what they wanted you to hear, Isabelle. It’s a trick.”

She didn’t believe him. More lies. She shook her head, tried to jerk her wrist out of his grasp, but he held tight.

“Put these on. Now.”

He handed her a pair of sunglasses. What the hell?

She tried to pull away, but his iron grip on her arm meant she wasn’t going anywhere. She wanted to drop to the ground and cry. She’d been so close to escape.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he whispered, “but you’re wrong. That thing you think was about to rescue you is a demon, and it wasn’t your sister’s voice. Now put these on. They’re eye protection.”

A demon? “He’s human. What are you talking about?”

“It’s not human, Isabelle. Let me prove it to you.”

If he’d take her around the corner, she could maybe break free again and get to her sister. It was at least a chance. Sighing in defeat, she slid on the sunglasses. They wrapped tightly around her eyes, darkening everything around her. “I can barely see.”

“Good. Now follow me.”

Like she had a choice? If she tried to run now he’d just grab her again. He pulled her in front of him and she had nowhere to go.

Shielded by Isabelle and the building, Dalton drew his bag off his shoulder and pulled something out, assembling two long metal pieces together with

swift, precise movements.

Oh, dear God, it was a gun. Not a regular gun, either, but something she'd never seen before, dark and scarylooking. He zippered up his bag, threw it over his shoulder, and grabbed her hand, keeping the weapon alongside his body so no one would see it.

"Stay close to me." He dragged her around the corner and into the dark alley.

It was even blacker in here than on the shadowed street, not helped by the sunglasses she wore. Why did he make her wear these?

The man was probably long gone by now, figuring she must have changed her mind about going with him.

No, wait. There he was, at the end of the alley. And Angelique was nowhere in sight. There was no exit down this alley, either. Was Dalton right? Had the man lied?

"Get behind me," Dalton instructed.

She did, then realized there were two men in the alley. The one who'd approached her earlier had sunglasses on, but the other didn't. His eyes were such a pale blue they glowed. Okay, that was weird.

"Demon hunter," the one said, his voice a low growl.

Dalton raised his weapon, said nothing and fired.

Isabelle smothered a gasp as a blue light emitted from the gun. The man on the left began to melt where he stood, but the other seemed to disappear with lightning quickness.

She had no more than blinked and the other man had moved in front of Dalton, jerking the weapon out of his hand. Dalton shoved Isabelle out of the way and she landed on her butt on the ground.

This couldn't be happening. The two men struggled, fighting in hand-to-hand-combat style. But the other man was changing. His fingernails were elongating into claws and his face had turned into a gruesome shape. As he raised his top lip, she could see fangs.

Recoiling in horror, she pushed off the ground with her heels, trying to get away.

It *was* a demon. Good God, Dalton hadn't been lying to her. Could he kill it? Where was his gun? She tore her gaze away from the two of them to scan the alley. His gun was only a few feet from her.

Dalton was strong. But was the demon stronger?

What if the demon killed Dalton? She couldn't allow that to happen. She had to do something. Scrambling onto her hands and knees, she hurried over to the gun and picked it up, hoping like hell she wouldn't somehow manage to shoot herself in the process. She launched herself onto her feet and positioned the gun. It was similar to any other type of gun. It had a trigger. If she just aimed and fired . . .

No, too close. She might hit Dalton. Oh, God, what was she going to do?

Just then, Dalton and the demon pivoted, and Dalton caught sight of her. He nodded, pushing the demon toward her position.

What was he doing?

Oh, she understood now. She backed against the wall, ready for his signal.

Dalton was amazingly strong, his muscles bulging with effort as he held tight to the demon, keeping hold of its wrists to prevent the demon from embedding its claws in Dalton's skin. He grimaced, then took a deep breath, pushing at the demon. It released, then Dalton slammed it against the opposite wall.

"Now!" he yelled.

Isabelle tossed the gun at him. Dalton pivoted and fired, and the demon began to melt into a hideous, gelatinous mass.

Dalton bent forward, panting heavily. Isabelle moved to his side. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. He didn't claw or bite me. They secrete lethal, paralyzing toxins, so I was lucky."

She shuddered, her stomach doing flip-flops as she fought back nausea.

He straightened and looked at her. "You did good. Thanks."

"You're welcome. It was self-preservation. I didn't want you to die and I'd be left alone with that thing."

He grinned. "Whatever the reason, you saved my life and I appreciate it."

Her legs were shaking as she continued to stare at the blob on the ground. "So that was really a demon."

"Yes."

She had no choice but to believe him now. But what did that make her? Not one of those things.

He stood and came over to her, resting his palm against her cheek. She searched his face, waiting for him to turn the weapon on her.

"I know what you're thinking. You're not like that. Come on, let's get out of here before more of them show up."

"How did they find me?"

"I don't know. But I need to get you someplace safe."

This time, she wasn't going to argue with him. Dalton retrieved their bags and grabbed his phone, made a quick call, and they headed out of the alley. Fortunately, there were very few passersby and she and Dalton and the

demons had been deep in the dark alley, so no one had seen what happened in there. How would they explain it anyway?

Within moments a black SUV with darkened windows arrived and Dalton opened the back door for her. She slid in, feeling safer already.

“These are our people,” he said, nodding to the driver as he climbed in after her and closed the door.

“Where are we going?”

“Up north of town a bit. To a secure location. Your sister is already there.”

“Angelique?” She’d heard her sister’s voice in that alley. The demon had faked it? What would have happened to her if she’d gone with that thing? Isabelle shivered, pinpricks of goose bumps breaking out over her flesh.

She was both elated and nervous about seeing Angie. She looked over at Dalton, who had her bag in his hand. The bag holding her mother’s diary.

Angie would see it. She would find out what was in there. She would know what Isabelle was.

Recalling what she’d just seen in the alley, the knots in Isabelle’s stomach tightened.

That’s not what she was. It couldn’t be.

She turned her head away from Dalton and looked out the window, hating the tears that pooled almost as much as she hated her mother right now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Your sister and Dalton are on their way here.”

Angelique’s heart tumbled at Michael’s statement. She looked at the group of people sitting around the kitchen table with her. Ryder, Mandy, Trace, all staring at her.

She focused on Michael instead. “Really? When will they be here?”

“Any time now.”

“Thank you.”

Her body trembled and she clasped her hands together under the table to still the shaking.

“Are you okay?” Ryder asked.

“Yes. I’m just anxious to see Isabelle, to find out what’s going on, and to see my mother’s journal.” The one she’d known nothing about.

Ryder smoothed his hand down her hair, cupping the back of her neck to massage the tension. She couldn’t help but notice the curious stares from Mandy and Trace, but she didn’t care. She enjoyed his touch.

Since their arrival several hours ago, they had explored the castle. The stone walls inside had been retained, and Angelique could still feel the ancient history there. Other than that, everything inside had been modernized, from the floors to the kitchens to every single room. She had no idea what was going on within this castle, but it certainly wasn’t historic. Computer gadgetry was everywhere, in every room, at least the ones she’d been to so far, since there were places she hadn’t yet been taken. She’d been shown to a lovely bedroom that retained a quaint, medieval quality with tapestry wall

hangings and a feather mattress, but had a modern bathroom with a large shower and spacious whirlpool tub. It was the strangest mix of old and new she'd ever encountered. She liked it, actually.

They had just reconnected with everyone in the kitchen when Michael announced the imminent arrival of her sister, so she hadn't yet had a chance to ask questions about the castle. She supposed that would have to wait, because she heard the front door and voices, instantly recognizing her sister's voice. She stood and hurried down the hall to the entryway.

As soon as Izzy spotted her, Angelique opened her arms and Isabelle ran into them. She hugged her sister, letting the tears fall.

No matter their differences or what had happened between them, they would always be family.

They were surrounded by people watching them, but Angelique didn't care. She pulled back, kissed both of Isabelle's cheeks. "I missed you. I've been so worried about you. Where have you been?"

Izzy's face was streaked with tears, too. "Busy, and here and there. Getting into trouble, of course."

Angelique let out a laugh. "Of course. Come, let's have something to drink." She slid an arm around Isabelle's waist, pausing only to introduce her sister to everyone before leading her into the kitchen.

"Wine?" Angelique asked.

Isabelle nodded. "I need it. I'm still shaking over what happened."

Ryder's gaze shot to Dalton's. "What?"

"Demon attack in an alley in the Catania business district. Isabelle and I . . . got separated and one tried to lure her. I got to her before she followed it into the alley."

Angelique turned to her sister. Isabelle shrugged. "I didn't know. It looked human. It had sunglasses on. It said it was sent by you, that you had been

looking for me. I even heard your voice calling me.”

Angelique hugged her sister again. Too close. Too damn close. “Damn Sons of Darkness.” She turned to Michael. “How do they know where we are all the time?”

Michael poured a glass of Chianti and leaned against the kitchen counter. “My guess is that you and your sister are connected to them, allowing them to track your whereabouts.”

“I wondered about that. I touched the black diamond in the caves in Australia. I had contact with them and with that object—I remember feeling strange when I was connected to it. I figured it somehow bonded me to them.”

“Perhaps,” Michael said, his expression benign.

“But that doesn’t explain Isabelle. She’s never been exposed to demons. How would they have any knowledge of her whereabouts?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with what happened to you in Australia, Angie.”

Angelique turned to her sister. “What do you mean?”

Isabelle slid into the chair and wrapped her fingers around the stem of the wineglass, lifting it to her lips and taking a long swallow. “We’re connected to the demons because we’re like them.”

“What? How can we be like them?”

“We have demon blood.”

Angelique’s heart stuttered. “No. You’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong.” Isabelle tilted her head back toward Dalton, who handed her bag to her. She pulled out an old book with a red cover and slid the book across the table toward Angelique.

“Mother’s diary. Read it. Out loud. Everyone might as well know.”

Angelique stared at the book, almost afraid to touch it. When she looked up at Izzy again, there were tears in her sister’s eyes.

“Know what, Isabelle?”

“We’re demons, Angie. Our mother had sex with a demon. Our father was a demon. In fact, he was killed by people just like the ones in this room.”

The room went cold and goose bumps popped up on her flesh. Angelique shook her head. “That’s not true.” None of it could be true. Could it?

But what about the incident in the cottage with Ryder, when he was attacked by the demon? The transformation she’d undergone hadn’t been normal—hadn’t been human. She’d rationalized it as some kind of power she’d acquired after coming into contact with the black diamond. Maybe that was just wishful thinking on her part, a way to explain away the unexplainable, when in her heart and the logical part of her mind, she’d already known the answer.

“I’m a demon?”

Isabelle laughed. “Not according to how you’ve lived your life, or anything that Mother said in her diary. Go ahead, read it. Or let me point out the highlights, since much of it is mundane.”

Angelique pushed the journal toward Isabelle. She didn’t want to know, couldn’t accept what she’d heard.

“Fine. If you don’t want to read it, I will.”

Isabelle opened the book and flipped the pages. “I’ll just cover the salient points. You know, the ones that talk about the demon.”

She began reading, translating into English as she read, and despite her horror, Angelique was transfixed. Her mother wrote of the night Angie and Isabelle had been conceived, about what happened to the man—the creature—who had fathered them. Angelique had seen demons melted down, and

Ryder explained what happened when the Sons of Darkness were killed. They disappeared in a pile of ash.

The man who had lain with her mother had, in fact, been a demon, not a human.

Their mother had lied. All these years, to find out everything Mother had told them about their father had been a lie.

Stunned, unable to speak, she could only stare at her sister as she went on to read more, especially about herself, their mother's concern for Isabelle's behavior and her request for Angelique to watch over Izzy.

Isabelle read it with no emotion, but Angelique knew how much it must have hurt to read their mother's words. When she closed the book, Angelique reached across the table and took her sister's hand.

"I'm sorry, Isabelle."

Izzy shrugged. "I've read it so many times it no longer hurts me."

That was a lie, and Angelique knew better than anyone how well Isabelle could mask her emotions. "Mother loved you."

"I guess she must have, because I'm still alive. We both are. But how could she have allowed us to live, knowing what our father was?"

Angelique's head was spinning. She had no answers, only a million questions. Isabelle had always come to her to solve her problems. This time, she had no solution.

"Because she would have loved us no matter what. No matter who or what the man who fathered us was, we were also part of her." That much she knew was true.

"I think she just blocked it out and pretended he was someone else."

"That's not true, Izzy. Look at what she wrote in her diary. It's obvious she knew exactly what he was, or at least that he wasn't . . . normal. It doesn't

sound like she repressed any memories at all, only that she was confused, and a little afraid of what happened. The good thing is she had us, we're here, we're human. At least so far." God, she hated even thinking it. What kind of blood ran in her veins?

"May I see the diary?" Michael asked.

"Sure, why not? It's not like I have any secrets anymore." Isabelle lifted it over her head and Michael took it from her.

"Thank you," Michael said. "I can assure you that any information given to anyone within the Realm of Light is kept in the strictest confidence. Your secret will remain safe with us."

"It's true," Mandy said. "You have nothing to fear from any of us, Isabelle. Most people don't even know we exist. We live with secrets every day. Yours is only one of them."

"Thanks. If you don't mind, I have a killer headache. It's been a long couple days. Is there someplace I can lie down?"

Angelique started to say she'd take her upstairs, but Dalton said it first.

"I'll take you. I've been here before. I'll find us some rooms."

Isabelle nodded, then looked to Angelique. "We'll talk in a bit."

"Okay. Get some rest."

After they left, Michael wandered off, his face buried in her mother's journal. Mandy and Trace excused themselves to do some weaponry inventory, leaving her alone with Ryder.

"Are you okay with all this?" he asked as soon as the rest of them left.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Actually, I feel . . . contaminated."

"Why?"

“It’s like I’m less than human. Maybe I knew this was coming, especially after what happened at the cottage. I just didn’t want to believe it.”

He stood, approached her. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re no different now than you were five minutes before the contents of your mother’s diary were revealed.”

She backed away from him. She wasn’t ready to discuss this. “I’m tired. I’m going to my room. I need to think.” She skirted around him, fleeing up to her room and shutting the door. She sat on the bed and stared out the window, feeling numb all over.

Less than a minute later, Ryder walked in and shut the door behind him.

“Don’t you knock?”

“Sometimes.” He came over to the bed and sat next to her.

“Go away, Ryder. I need to be alone.”

“No, you don’t. Not now.”

“You have no idea what I need. Can’t you give me five minutes to process this by myself?”

“Why? So you can sit here alone and have the time to convince yourself that you’re worthless because you have demon blood running through your veins?”

She hated that he voiced what she was thinking. “You have no idea how I feel.”

“Don’t I? I might not have demon blood in me, but my father’s blood is there.”

“He was human.”

Ryder snorted. “Was he? I’m not sure about that. And this isn’t about me. Look at Derek and Nic. They’re half demons.”

“And?”

“They function normally as humans. They can control their demon side. You’ll be able to do the same.”

She’d forgotten about the two brothers who were half demons. They were both so normal in appearance, so human in every way, yet she’d seen them in action. They could almost call out the demon side of themselves at will, and then tuck it away again, becoming perfectly normal.

Was there hope for her, too?

“Gina and Shay love Derek and Nic, you know.”

Her gaze whipped up to his. “I know.” She’d seen the couples together. Shay and Gina, human women in love with demon men.

“They accept their men, even though they’re partially demon.”

Her throat went dry. Was he trying to tell her something? “What’s your point, Ryder?”

His eyes were so dark, like a warm whiskey, she felt herself go hot all over. Especially when he didn’t say anything, just looked at her . . .

He cleared his throat. She waited.

“You should never think of yourself as unworthy,” he finally said. “Of anything. You saved my life back at the cottage. You could turn in to one hell of a demon hunter someday. The Realm of Light can use someone like you in its ranks.”

So not what she thought he was going to say. Not. At. All. Disappointment and embarrassment flushed heat through her body. She’d wanted his acceptance, to hear that he didn’t care if she had demon blood in her. She wanted to hear that he would still care about her.

He could talk about others falling in love with half demons, but that didn’t include him. He could never do that. Obviously he couldn’t get past the fact

she was part demon.

Oh, he could fuck her. No problem there. But he'd never love her.

"Thanks for your advice," she said, standing up and moving toward the door. She had to get him out of here before she embarrassed herself further by dissolving into tears. "I'll talk to Michael about a possible career with the Realm of Light."

Ryder stood and approached the door she held open, frowning. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all. I'm just tired. And I need to go talk to my sister. She's upset."

He reached for her, but she took a step back.

"Angie—"

"Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Ryder. But there are things I need to do." She motioned to the hallway, hoping she wouldn't have to come right out and ask him to leave her room. She was barely holding it together.

He gave her a curt nod and walked out. She shut the door and leaned her back against it, hating the hot splash of tears that fell from her face.

Stupid. God, she was so stupid. Was she really expecting a declaration of love from Ryder?

Yeah, right. He thought she might make a great demon hunter.

Why didn't she ever listen to her mother and be more cautious with her heart?

She sank down the door and sat on the floor, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs.

Too much. There had been too much revelation lately, and she couldn't handle any more.

She laid her chin on her knee and stared at the dust motes swimming in the beam of sunlight shining on the floor.

Oh, to be that free, that mindless. She was tired of responsibility, would love to run away and forget all of this.

But she couldn't. Because of Isabelle. Izzy needed her. She was always the strong one. And she needed that strength now more than ever.

There was no one for her to lean on.

She needed to stop feeling sorry for herself and go talk to her sister. God only knew what must be going through Isabelle's mind right now. What was she thinking after reading Mother's diary, knowing the concerns their mother had about Isabelle?

Izzy was in trouble. And in danger. There was a reason Bart hadn't been able to use Angelique in the caves in Australia, a reason she hadn't been able to empower the black diamond.

Maybe that was because the dominant demon blood was in Isabelle, not her. She didn't really understand it since they were twins, but there was nothing normal about either of them. Izzy had always been different.

And maybe Bart had wanted Isabelle all along, and had just chosen the wrong sister.

Angelique had always known this, though she hadn't wanted to believe it was true. Now she knew the fact and the reason why.

She also knew what she had to do—use all her power to protect her sister, even if it meant betraying the Realm of Light—and Ryder.

Again.

The first thing she had to do was assess Isabelle's state of mind, get her sister calmed down and under control, and let her know that she was loved.

She couldn't assure Isabelle she was going to be okay. Not until she understood the capacity of their powers. Even Angelique didn't understand that yet.

Time, and maybe a few tests of their skills, would show what she and her sister were capable of. Angelique refused to live in fear.

But she knew this much—no one was going to hurt her sister.

No one.

And speaking of her sister, she needed to go talk to her. It would help take her mind off feeling sorry for herself, too. She washed her face, brushed her hair, and changed clothes, then felt a lot better.

Time to worry about Isabelle. That was always good for a distraction.

She found Izzy's room, knocked on the door, and opened it. They'd never stood on ceremony with each other. She figured Isabelle would know she'd be coming in soon anyway. The room was dark, the drapes closed. Isabelle sat in a chair near an old stone fireplace. Angelique slid into the chair on the other side of the hearth.

"What are you thinking?"

Isabelle was silent for a few seconds. "I'm trying not to think. All I've been doing for the past six months is thinking. I'm tired of it."

"Is that how long you've had Mother's diary?"

"Yes."

"Where did you find it?"

"Do you remember when she died, we divvied up her personal things?"

"Yeah."

"I always loved her hatboxes."

Angelique's lips curled at the childhood memory. "I remember."

"So you let me take all her hatboxes, because the designs were so pretty. I put them away at the top of the closet in my apartment. For years they sat there. You know I'm never at home."

"Yes, of course."

"Anyway, last year I decided to go home because I needed a break, wanted to catch up on paperwork and to plan the next year's activities. While there I decided to clean out the closet in the guest bedroom, and I came across Mother's hats. I'd never even opened the boxes. I was in a nostalgic mood that day, so I took all the boxes down from the shelf and opened them up, one by one. Underneath her favorite purple hat—you remember the one she got in London?"

"Yes, I do." The bittersweet memories brought tears to Angelique's eyes. She remembered their mother wearing that hat. It was a pretty hat, purple velvet with yellow feathers sticking straight up. But Mother had claimed she loved it best out of all her hats. In fact, she'd made a pointed effort to tell Angelique to take her hats. Angelique had brushed it off, knowing how much Izzy had loved Mother's hats, so she'd let her sister have them.

Maybe Mother had made that request because she never intended for Isabelle to find the diary. She'd wanted Angelique to find it, to read it, to understand and possibly help her sister.

"The diary was tucked inside the purple hat," Isabelle continued. "I had no idea what it was, so I opened it up and started reading it. I was so surprised that Mother kept a diary. I never knew."

"Neither did I."

"I sat on the floor and read the entire thing, cover to cover. And then I read it again."

"You're certain it's genuine."

Isabelle nodded. “It’s our mother’s handwriting without a doubt. I don’t need to have it authenticated. Besides, no one had access to the hatboxes except you and me. We took possession of her things right after she died, and I brought the boxes to my apartment, where they’ve been ever since.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Isabelle? Why didn’t you call me right away when you found it?”

Isabelle frowned, rubbed two fingers across her brow. “And tell you what? That we were children of a demon? I wasn’t sure you’d believe me, and why would I share that burden with you? I wish I didn’t know.”

Angelique leaned forward and clasped her hands together. “We’re sisters, Iz. We’re family. You didn’t have to bear this burden alone.”

“I tried not to think about it at all. I shoved the diary in my luggage and went back to work. But eventually I read it again. And then I read it every night, questioning myself, questioning Mother, my entire life. Some of the things Mother said about me in there—Angie, I don’t even remember doing those things.”

Angelique moved to Isabelle’s chair, crawling into it, folding her sister into her arms. She hugged her close and brushed her hand over her hair. “Oh, Izzy. I’m so sorry. I wish you had told me.”

She rocked her sister for a few minutes, reminded of their childhood, of holding each other in the dark when one of them had nightmares.

“It’s not you, Angie. You’re not bad. It’s me.”

Angelique pulled back, searching Isabelle’s face. “What?”

“I’m evil. Mother said so.”

“No, she didn’t say that.”

“Yes, she did. She wanted you to watch me. She said I was dark. She was worried about me. I’m the bad twin, you’re the good twin.”

“That’s not true at all. I think Mother was worried about your unorthodox methods of archaeology. You know she was a purist. She wanted to make sure you didn’t besmirch the family name by raising the *Titanic* and selling it on eBay.”

Isabelle laughed. “Probably. Though I can’t help but think she suspected I had an evil streak.”

“You did pull my hair a lot.”

“Because you were such a Goody Two-shoes.”

Angelique grinned. “And you were a brat.”

“You were just jealous because you didn’t know how to be bad.”

“Oh, I think when the two of us got together, we could be very, very bad.”

Isabelle giggled, the same way she used to when they were little. “So true.”

Now that Isabelle’s spirits were lightened, it was time to keep her positive and upbeat. “See? There’s nothing different about you, Izzy. Or about me.” Though that wasn’t necessarily true. She just wasn’t ready to tell Isabelle about what had happened to her at the cottage, about how she’d changed.

“We can’t deny our parentage.”

“No, but having demon blood doesn’t define who we are. There are people within the Realm of Light who have demon blood. And they’ve learned to live with that side of themselves.”

Isabelle looked away. “I’m not sure I can. Now that I know what I am, I realize that what I had always felt inside me could be this demon blood.”

“What do you mean?”

Her sister pushed off the chair and walked to the window, fingering the drape pulls. “I’ve always felt . . . different.” She turned and looked at Angelique. “Haven’t you?”

“No.”

“Well, I have. And Mother always watched me. She looked at me differently than she looked at you.”

Angelique rose and walked to the window, drawing open the drapes to let the sunlight in. “That’s because you were always in trouble, brat.”

Isabelle’s lips lifted in a wry smile. “It was more than that. There’s something inside me, Angie. Something dark pulling at me. I feel it. I always have. I was the one in trouble at school. And I . . . miss time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Episodes where I feel like I’ve fallen asleep. Where I’m one place and wake up somewhere else. It’s weird.”

“You never told me about this.”

“The fire Mother talked about in her diary? When we were on that dig in Africa? It happened then. I was playing in our bungalow, but I woke up in front of the burning bungalow, a pack of matches in my hand.”

Dear God. Chills broke out on Angelique’s skin.

“What did Mother say?”

“She just gathered me up, bathed me, and put me to bed. Nothing was ever said. I was young. Confused. I didn’t make the connection. Mother said the fire woke us all. But I think I started that fire, that I deliberately tried to kill that family, Angie.”

Angelique took Isabelle’s hand. It was cold as ice. “You wouldn’t do that.”

Isabelle turned hard eyes on her. “Wouldn’t I? We don’t know that, do we? A demon could do anything. Who knows what else I’ve done. I’ve lost lots of time during my blank episodes over the years, Angie. I have no idea what I’ve done.”

“Don’t buy into a self-fulfilling prophecy. You can change who you are, or who you think you are.”

“I don’t think so. I think what I am—or what I’m supposed to be—is already set on a course. It’s out of my control and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Isabelle turned to her, and the look in her eyes was downright frightening. “Don’t I? I know more than you think.”

That voice, the tone, the way her eyes had gone cold and flat. For a split second, it was like Isabelle had left the room, replaced instead by someone else entirely.

Isabelle spoke nonsense, and it scared Angelique.

“Let’s go downstairs and talk to the others,” Angelique said. “Maybe they can offer some answers.”

Isabelle blinked, then shrugged. “Sure. Give me a minute to freshen up and change clothes.”

Isabelle slipped into the bathroom and closed the door. Angelique felt a cold chill slip through the room, then it warmed again. She wrapped her arms around her chest and stared at the closed bathroom door.

Just a moment ago, when Isabelle was talking about her future, Angelique had felt fear. She had never in her entire life been afraid of her sister. Angry, frustrated, any emotion under the rainbow, yes. But fear, no.

Until now. Was that because Mother had sheltered her from Isabelle’s influence all those years? Had Angelique been oblivious to her sister’s faults? Had she let her own concern for Isabelle blind her to the truth?

Maybe she had. Maybe she’d protected Izzy to the point where she hadn’t seen the truth right in front of her.

Something just now had changed in Isabelle. From one second to the next, it was like a different person had entered her sister's body. And just like that, she'd changed back.

Something about Izzy wasn't right. Angelique hoped to God the Realm of Light could help her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ryder didn't know what he'd done or said to Angie, but whatever it was, he'd fucked it up. She was pissed off or upset. At him, or maybe about something else.

Okay, definitely about the contents of her mother's diary, that was a given. But he figured it was more than that, and it had to do with what he'd said to her in her bedroom.

Dammit, he'd never been good with women and dealing with their emotional shit. He should have let her leave the room and dwell by herself instead of following her and trying to make her feel better. All he'd done was make it worse, and now he couldn't figure out how to fix it, especially since he didn't know what he'd said that was so wrong.

Why couldn't women be direct like men? Why couldn't they say exactly what was bothering them, instead of trying to hide their emotions? It would be a lot easier if Angelique had just slapped him upside the head with whatever he'd said to upset her. Then he could have corrected it, or re-explained it in a way that wouldn't hurt her feelings.

Maybe. Or maybe not.

Why was he even bothering to think about this? Why did it even matter to him whether her feelings were bruised?

Because you care about her, dumbass.

Yeah, yeah. And look where that was getting him. Nowhere at supersonic speed.

Screw it. He had more important things to do. Nice, distracting things that didn't have to do with women and emotion and caring. He walked down to

the massive library—or he supposed they called it the great hall—where Dalton, Michael, Mandy, and Trace were going over the diary.

“Anything?” he asked.

“From what we’ve been able to gather, it appears Monette—the girls’ mother—met up with one of the Sons of Darkness,” Michael said.

“Not just a run-of-the-mill demon, then,” Dalton said.

“No. From her description of the hunters’ destruction of the demon, and his name, it was a Lord.”

“So, he was out trolling for a human host for demon baby-making?” Ryder asked.

“Seems that way. And succeeded, too.”

“Do you know the names of all of the Sons of Darkness?” Ryder asked. “Is there like . . . a flowchart or something?”

Michael snorted. “We do know who they all are and actually, yeah, there is a flowchart. The Realm has had contact with all of them and we’ve catalogued them through the centuries. We know who lives . . . and who has died.”

“Like Ben and Bart.” Ryder knew those two for certain since he’d been present at both their deaths. Other than those two, he was in the dark.

“Are there always twelve?” Ryder asked, remembering that when Lou told them about the Sons of Darkness, he mentioned twelve Lords.

“Yes. There are always twelve. When one dies, another is—promoted, I’d guess you could put it—as a Lord to take his place. They are the master rulers of the demons.”

“And are we part of all this?” Angelique asked.

Angelique and Isabelle stood in the doorway. So similar, and yet different in so many ways. He could easily tell them apart, even though their faces were mirror images. Yes, hair color and style were different, but he knew Angie, could pick her from Isabelle even if their hair had been exactly the same. Maybe it was because he knew Angelique better; her body language was different from her sister's.

There was just something different about her . . . something in her eyes as she looked at him. At least for a brief second before whipping her gaze away to put her attention on Michael.

"You are indeed part of all this," Michael said. "Come on in and join us. I'll try to answer as many of your questions as I can."

Angelique took her sister's hand and led her into the room.

Ryder noticed that Angelique took a seat next to Mandy, as far away from him as possible—like across the room.

Yeah, she was definitely mad at him. And she wouldn't make eye contact with him.

"We've been studying your mother's diary," Michael said.

"May I?" Angelique asked.

"Of course." Michael handed the journal to her. "The demon who fathered you was a Lord of the Sons of Darkness."

Angelique's head shot up, her eyes wide. "A Lord?"

"Yes."

"That's bad," she whispered, staring down again at the diary.

"It is?" Isabelle asked.

"Yes." Angelique looked at Michael. "Tell her about the Queen of Darkness."

“Who’s the Queen of Darkness?” Isabelle turned to look at Angelique, then at Michael.

“We don’t know. Bart mentioned it in Australia when he was performing the ceremony with the black diamond. Something about Nic having to join hands with the Queen of Darkness to empower the black diamond.”

Angelique and Isabelle exchanged worried glances. Did they really think either of them could be the so-called Queen of Darkness?

“Bart said I wasn’t ‘the one,’ ” Angelique said.

“Yes. He did. Which doesn’t mean he was referring to the queen.”

“What else could he have been referring to? Please don’t treat me like I’m stupid. I can connect the dots just fine.”

She was anything but stupid, that much Ryder already knew. Her mind processed things at a rapid pace. What he’d said to her in her room had been true—she really would make a great demon hunter. She could think on her feet and she wasn’t easily afraid. Add her demon blood into the mix and the woman could kick ass.

Ryder didn’t admire many people, thought very few his equal, mainly because of his skills. He’d worked his ass off to gain the knowledge and abilities he had, and he felt that put him a step above a lot of people. He admired and respected his fellow hunters, but he was as good as most of them.

Most people didn’t have the proficiency. Angelique? Yeah, she could slip into line with them in a heartbeat. He’d love to have her fighting next to him.

“I would never imply you’re stupid, Angelique. I just don’t happen to believe that either you or your sister is the so-called Queen of Darkness that Bart mentioned.”

“Then why would he have dragged me into the ceremony with Nic? Why was he so angry when the light within the black diamond died as soon as I touched it?”

“Because even the Sons of Darkness can guess wrong,” Michael said with a twitch of his lips.

“You mean even they don’t know who the Queen of Darkness is?” Ryder asked.

Michael turned his head to Ryder. “That would be my guess.”

“Interesting,” Dalton said.

“The Realm has been in discussions about this Queen of Darkness since Lou reported it. We believe they’re referring to a daughter of the great evil one, someone to lead and stand with the Sons of Darkness.”

“So another Lord, only this time female?” Mandy asked. “I didn’t know they allowed female Lords.”

“It’s never been done to our knowledge,” Michael said. “But that doesn’t mean it’s forbidden. Who knows what he has planned.”

“He being . . . Lucifer?” Isabelle asked.

Ryder felt bad for Isabelle. She huddled close to her sister and had a shocked look about her. She was pale, her face devoid of any emotion as she took in the conversation. Ryder slanted a glance to Dalton, who was staring at Isabelle and frowning. Dalton leaned against the arm of one of the sofas, across the room from Isabelle. His hands were clenched into fists as if he was physically restraining himself from going over to her.

Ryder wondered what had happened between them on the yacht.

“Whatever name you want to use for the great evil,” Michael said.

“And you think the Queen of Darkness might be his progeny?” Angelique asked. “And not either one of us?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Or it could be one of us,” Isabelle said. “You don’t really know for certain we aren’t, do you?”

Michael hesitated for a few seconds before answering. “No, I don’t.”

“And since it couldn’t be Angie because Bart already said it wasn’t her, and the gem went dark when she touched it, then that only leaves me,” Isabelle said, pulling away from her sister to lean forward and stare directly at Michael.

Damn, her eyes practically fired sparks. She seemed pissed.

“I could be the Queen of Darkness he spoke about. And until you get me together with this black diamond, until you see what it does when I touch it, then you won’t really be sure, will you? So don’t blow smoke up my ass and tell me you think I’m safe, Michael. Just give it to me straight. If I’m some evil creature you need to destroy, I’d just as soon know right now.”

Dalton’s fists clenched so tight he wondered if he was drawing blood.

This wasn’t going well. He could feel Isabelle’s pain, her anger and confusion, and he wanted to do something about it. But he was the last person in the room she’d want comfort from right now, so he kept his distance.

She needed reassurance. She wasn’t evil; he knew she wasn’t.

Though if he was thinking logically, which he obviously wasn’t, he’d realize that even he didn’t know that for sure.

“Isabelle, no one is condemning you,” Michael said. “We just don’t know all the facts yet.”

“So what do we have to do to get the facts? Get the black diamond and test me on the thing, right?” she asked, her voice a hard challenge.

Dalton's lips twitched. She didn't back down, even though he knew she had to be scared out of her wits. Points for Isabelle.

"It's not a bad idea," Mandy said.

"No, it's a terrible idea." Michael turned to Mandy. "The last thing we want is to bring the black diamond anywhere within close proximity of either Angelique or Isabelle."

Mandy frowned. "Why? Isn't that the point? To determine if either of them can activate the thing or whatever it is they might be able to do?"

Michael didn't say anything, but from the look on his face he wasn't happy with Mandy.

"Well? Isn't it?" she challenged.

"I understand that you all mean well, but we have to control these things, take them slowly. We don't want to—"

"You don't want to what?" Angelique interrupted. "You don't want to scare the living daylights out of us by making us think there's some demon lurking inside us? We have news for you, Michael. Too late. We're already freaked out."

"My sister's right. It really can't get much worse than this. At least we'd know. And isn't knowing something better than fumbling around in the dark with our heads up our asses?"

Dalton snorted. Isabelle turned her gaze in his direction and the hard lines of anger on her face softened.

Forgiveness, maybe? He really was on her side. He believed in her. Did she know that?

He didn't want this to end badly for her. Not that he had any control over that, but he could hope.

On the yacht, he'd been doing his job and nothing more.

No, that was a lie. He'd done a hell of a lot more than just his job. Isabelle had unleashed something in him that had lain dormant and untouched for far too long. He wasn't sure he could tuck it back in its cage again. Even now, he ached to go to her, to fold her into his arms and protect her.

He resisted, knowing what would happen if he did.

"Come on, Michael. Get the diamond and bring it here," Mandy said. "You can control it within the Realm of Light compound. Nothing will happen and the demons can't get to them here."

"This is a Realm of Light compound?" Ryder asked.

"You new people haven't been to one yet?" Michael asked.

Dalton had been to several, so he naturally assumed everyone knew where they were. But Ryder and Trace were newer members of the team and they'd been on the go since they'd been brought on board. No chance to bring them into one of the Realm's locations.

"So what's here besides the obvious?" Trace asked, getting to his feet.

Dalton wagged his brows. "Fun stuff. Wanna see?"

"Hell, yeah," Ryder said. "I can't believe we haven't been given a tour of the secret stuff yet."

"Sorry." Michael's lips twitched and he rubbed his fingers across his lips. "We've been busy."

"Boys. Start talking high-tech toys and gadgets and they get all testosteroney," Mandy said.

"That's not even a word," Trace said.

"It is now." Mandy arched a brow, then turned to Angelique and Isabelle. "You coming?"

"Are we invited?" Angelique asked.

“Of course. This affects you, too. You need to know what’s here and how it all works.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Michael said, standing, too.

“Oh, lighten up, Mike.” Mandy turned to him. “Are you always this stuffy? Does every Keeper have to be all about the protocol? Ease up a bit. Angie and Isabelle have been through hell.” She threw a glance over her shoulder. “No pun intended, ladies.” She turned back to Michael. “They deserve to be in this every step of the way. No more secrets.”

Dalton wanted to laugh. He’d met Michael before; he had fought beside him more than once. Michael was all by-the-book and into his role as Keeper, and no one challenged him.

But Michael had never gone toe-to-toe with their wild child Mandy before. She always said what was on her mind and damn the consequences. She was their group’s adopted little sister, and had been since she’d been brought in to the hunters when she was barely a teen.

Though she was all woman now—all five ten of her, with her luscious body and raven hair that fell to her waist.

None of them had ever let a guy within a hundred yards of her, much to Mandy’s irritation. Not that there had ever been time for the kid to have a normal life, or a normal date.

Had she ever even had a date? He couldn’t recall.

And he really needed to stop thinking of her as a kid. She was twenty-three years old now, and a woman.

A sassy, bold, able-to-stand-on-her-own woman.

One who wasn’t afraid to talk back to a Keeper.

“Well?” She put her hands on her hips and faced off against Michael, who at nearly a foot taller than she was didn’t seem the least bit intimidated.

“Well, what?”

Michael looked irritated. He was always calm and in control, but right now he looked pissed.

“Well, are you going to let us into your secret inner sanctum, or am I going to have to get my laser and start blowing through the doors?”

Michael’s gaze narrowed. “Lou warned me about you.”

“And yet you let me in the door anyway. Your mistake. Come on, Mike. We’re waiting.”

“It’s Michael.”

“And I’m Mandy. We’ve already met. You don’t want to make me angry . . . Mike.”

“And you don’t want to make *me* angry, Mandy. You might get your way with men like Dalton and the others from your Realm team who indulge you like a child because you grew up around them. Don’t make the mistake of thinking I’ll do the same thing.”

Tension filled the room, and something else that Dalton felt and recognized, but wasn’t certain was actually here.

Power. An otherworldly power that seemed to squeeze the air from the room.

It wasn’t evil, but it was definitely a warning.

Dalton’s gaze shifted to Michael, who still had his attention on Mandy.

Ah. This Keeper had some muscle. Typically no one else could sense a Keeper’s power. But Dalton felt it. Hell, everyone in the room could.

So did Mandy, because she didn’t even flinch, not even when the strands of her hair started blowing over her shoulder.

“Impressive,” she said. “Can we go now?”

But her voice had lowered an octave, no longer laced with as much bravado as before. Still, she got points for not flinching. Dalton wouldn’t want to piss off a Keeper.

Mandy had no fear.

“Fine.”

Mandy nodded and turned on her heel, heading toward the two women. As she passed by Dalton, she winked.

That was interesting.

This whole day had been interesting so far. And Dalton got the idea they hadn’t even started yet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Angelique walked behind Mandy, still shaken by what she'd witnessed in the library.

Michael had some serious skills. She had underestimated him, and the amount of power he held. She'd felt the heat emanating from him, the force he'd projected at Mandy when she'd irritated him.

And even then, she guessed he had barely let any of it loose.

She had a lot to learn about these Realm of Light people.

Speaking of warmth, she felt Ryder's presence behind her, knew he was watching her, but couldn't bring herself to turn around, to speak to him.

What would she say? *Hey, you hurt me. What do you have to say for yourself?*

Yeah. That would be pointless. Best to forget it and move on. There were more important things to worry about.

Like this whole Queen of Darkness thing. And Isabelle.

Michael led the way through the foyer and toward the left down a rich, darkly paneled hallway gently lit by wall sconces. This place was like a maze. Turn left, go straight for a while, turn right, more going straight.

She was going to be utterly lost without a map or a GPS to guide her around the castle. They finally reached a stairwell, and Michael directed them down several flights.

Now the décor was all old castle, nothing modern as they traversed ancient gray stone steps with no handrails, only the rocky wall on their right to hang

on to.

“Be careful. It’s dark down here,” Michael said.

A little late for that warning, since they’d long ago been plunged into pitch blackness.

She felt Ryder’s hand on her hip as he moved beside her and hooked his fingers in her belt loops. He didn’t say anything to her, nor did she to him as they made their way down the twisting stairs. At this point she was grateful for the hand. She couldn’t see anything.

“I’ve got my shades on that help me see in the dark,” he finally said. “I figured you could use a hand.”

“Thanks.”

It felt good to have his body beside her. She hated that he had this effect on her, hated the way her body responded to his touch. Why couldn’t she be immune?

“We’re reaching the bottom now.” He whispered against her cheek, his breath warm and ruffling her hair.

She was melting, and despising her lack of resolve even more.

So when had she gone weak where men were concerned? She’d worked shoulder to shoulder with them for years and they never affected her.

She already knew the answer: It wasn’t men in general—it was Ryder. Why did the one man who had the power to stir her with a simple touch also have the power to eviscerate her with his words?

“Where the hell are we going?” Isabelle asked from behind her. “The freakin’ dungeon?”

Angelique was beginning to wonder that herself. It was cold, dark, and dank down here, but at least they’d reached the bottom of the stairs now.

“Yes, it’s a long way,” Michael said. “Sorry.”

There was more light down here, and at least she could see. They stood in front of a thick metal door wider than normal. A flat pad was mounted on a stand to the right of the door. It looked a lot like a computer monitor, but it was surrounded by blinking red lights. Michael laid his right palm on the pad, and it scanned his hand.

Several loud and heavy clicks later, the door swung to the inside. Light blinded Angelique as they stepped from ancient stone into a sterile-looking lablike atmosphere, all modern and high-tech.

“So it’s a dungeon and Fort Knox,” Isabelle mumbled over her shoulder.

“Seems that way.”

“Trust me. Security is essential,” Michael said, standing by the door and motioning them inside. “This is one of the Realm of Light operations centers. We create weaponry, do research, and generally do what we can to assist the field personnel, the hunters.”

It was extremely bright in the room from overhead fluorescent lighting. The place was like one huge cave—the size of a football field. And within it, people. A lot of them.

Desks were interspersed around the room, along with large tables where God only knows what was going on, but it was obviously tech oriented. There was weaponry of all kinds spread across tables and stored in locked cabinets, as well as ammunition, and beakers of bubbling liquid that put a chemistry lab to shame. A section in the back was filled ten feet high with books, almost like a minilibrary, and computers within a U-shaped desk area with over a dozen people tapping furiously at the keys.

The staff glanced up at all of them as they walked by, smiled and nodded, then resumed working.

Angelique had no clue what was on those screens, since it looked all sci-fi to her. Everywhere in the room there was something fascinating going on.

And things beyond her ability to understand.

“Who works here?” Isabelle asked.

“Scientists, weapons experts, former military personnel, religious and other researchers. You name it, they work for the Realm of Light,” Michael explained.

“How many compounds like this are there?” Ryder asked, his attention focused on the weapons tables.

“Throughout the world we have about . . . twenty right now.”

“And how do you fund all this?” Angelique couldn’t begin to fathom the cost of maintaining compounds that housed this much staff, as well as the research they did. Especially creating the futuristic weaponry she’d seen in action. Not to mention sending demon hunters all over the world to fight.

“The Realm is well funded. Always has been. Money is never an issue.”

Well, that was a vague answer. But she supposed she didn’t need to know where the money came from.

“Trust me, Angelique, our resources come from legal means,” Michael assured her.

“I didn’t think otherwise.” Somebody, somewhere, was loaded. That much was certain. Because it took millions, possibly billions, to keep twenty operations like this running.

“So what kind of safety features do you have here? Are we protected from demon attacks?” Angelique asked, mainly for Isabelle’s benefit.

“Yes. This is hallowed ground because the castle contains the ruins of an ancient church. The facility down here actually houses religious, consecrated artifacts, though they’re underground and beneath this room in order to offer protection against a demon attack. The demons will not touch foot on sacred ground. In addition, our security here is massive.”

“I’ve seen demons materialize out of thin air, Michael,” Angelique said. “I don’t think deep underground tunnels or thick walls will keep them out.”

Michael smiled. “No, that’s true enough. But the sanctity of our grounds will. The damned don’t walk the holy places.”

Angelique had guessed that much, which was why she was hoping the black diamond remained safe.

“So in other words, this would be a safe place to test the power of the black diamond in close proximity to Angelique and Isabelle,” Mandy said with an I-told-you-so smirk on her face.

“You don’t realize the power within the black diamond,” Michael said.

“Are you saying the Realm can’t handle it?” she challenged.

“Honestly? I’m not sure.”

“Why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

“Because I’m trying not to scare our guests who don’t work for the Realm,” Michael replied, his meaning obvious.

And that silenced Mandy. She didn’t say a word, just turned and walked away, wandering among the tables to talk to the weapons experts.

“You don’t know what might happen if we’re in contact with the black diamond?” Isabelle asked.

“No, I don’t. But I’m hoping nothing will happen.”

“Like with me in Australia,” Angelique said.

Michael nodded.

“So there’s a chance the same thing will happen with me. I’ll touch it and . . . nothing.”

The look of hope on Izzy's face squeezed Angelique's heart. She wanted that to be the case, for her sister's sake. She wanted there to be nothing in common between the black diamond and her sister.

But call it a sixth sense, or a weird case of foreboding, but Angelique felt that wasn't what was going to happen. To have the black diamond here at the compound, in a controlled environment when Isabelle touched it, would give her some measure of comfort.

And at least they'd know then.

"Are we going to get it?" Mandy asked, rocking on the balls of her feet.

"You should learn patience," Michael said.

"I've tried. It's not in me. When are we going?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "We'll leave in the morning." He turned to Angelique. "Where is it?"

She shook her head. "I'm not giving you the location. I'm going with you."

"That's not a good idea. You're safer here."

"And the person who's . . . taking care of it for me won't give it up to anyone but me. I guarantee it. You have no choice but to take me along."

He nodded. "Fine. We'll all go."

"That includes me," Isabelle said.

"No. Absolutely not," Michael said. "It's not necessary for you to be there, and most definitely dangerous."

"I'm not going to be left behind."

"You won't be alone, Isabelle. There's nothing to be afraid of. There are hundreds of Realm staff here to protect you."

“That’s not the point. I need to be with my sister. I don’t want to be separated from her again, not even for a few hours.”

Angelique scratched her nose, contemplating this dilemma, when a thought occurred to her. “I have an idea. The location of the black diamond is also sacred ground. Couldn’t we conduct the experiment there? We’d be safe from demons.”

“Where is the location, Angelique?”

“A small church near the foot of Mount Etna.”

“So it’s not far from here,” Dalton said. “That might work.”

“Why don’t we just leave it there?” Ryder asked. “If it’s safe, why not just let it be?”

“Because the Sons of Darkness will eventually find it, or use Angelique and Isabelle to find it. They’ll send a nondemon in after it and get their hands on it one way or the other,” Michael said. “We need to have it in our possession. We need to figure out its power, then we need to destroy it. It’s the only way to guarantee the Sons of Darkness can’t use it against the Realm of Light. It’s the only way to protect Isabelle and Angelique.”

Destruction of the black diamond sounded like a really good idea. Angelique would be glad when it was gone for good. “So I’ll take everyone to it,” she said.

“Or we could just go get it and bring it back here and try the experiment in a safer environment. I don’t like the idea of taking either Angelique or Isabelle out of this location,” Ryder said.

Angelique whipped around and faced Ryder. “Why not?”

“Because I know the Sons of Darkness. They’re out there, just waiting. They want both you and your sister, and the black diamond. It would be easier to fetch the diamond, leave the two of you here, and then you can do your experiments when we get back.”

Exasperated, she said, “I already told you the caretaker of the diamond won’t release it to anyone but me.”

“Bet I could convince him.”

“You can’t use force on this person, Ryder. I have to be there.” She understood he was trying to protect Isabelle and her, but he wasn’t making this any easier. She knew what needed to be done.

“Ryder’s right. We can’t risk taking Isabelle with us,” Michael said. “It’s bad enough Angelique has to go.”

He turned to Isabelle. “I’m sorry. I know this has all been traumatic for you, but you need to stay here. It’s not safe taking you with us.”

Angelique felt awful seeing the look of fear and anguish on her sister’s face, but in this, she agreed with Michael. Her sister had to remain safe. She reached for Isabelle’s hands. “Where we’re going isn’t far. We won’t be gone long, I promise. This will be over soon.”

Isabelle nodded. “If you think I should stay here, then I will.”

The group left the research area and went back upstairs to the main part of the house. They had dinner, discussed their trip, then relocated to the library.

“We’ll leave early in the morning,” Michael said, then excused himself to prepare for the trip.

Mandy, Dalton, and Trace left, too, claiming they were going to check weaponry for the morning, leaving Angelique with Isabelle and Ryder.

They sat in silence for a while, no doubt each pondering the situation. Angelique didn’t have to wonder what Ryder was thinking—she already knew.

“No, I shouldn’t have taken the black diamond from the cave in Australia. We wouldn’t have to go through this if I hadn’t.”

He looked at her. “Huh?”

“I know that’s what you were thinking.”

“Actually, I was thinking I’d pack two lasers tomorrow, and that I hoped the weapons team had the silver weaponry ready just in case we ran up against some of those new demons. I was also thinking that I wish some of the other hunters were here so you could be better protected while we’re out there tomorrow. That’s what I was thinking.”

“Oh.”

“What’s done is done, Angie. You can never go back and undo. You can only go forward. Quit beating yourself up over what you did in Australia. I get why you took the black diamond. Given the situation, I might have done the same thing.”

“Thanks.” She looked down at her hands, feeling guilty for always thinking the worst of him.

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed.” Isabelle stood.

“Want me to go up with you?” Angelique asked.

Izzy shook her head. “No. I need to be alone. But I’ll be up early in the morning so I’ll see you before you leave.”

“Okay. ’Night, Izzy.”

Isabelle left the room. Angelique figured she should, too. There was no reason to linger in here with Ryder. She stood.

“Stay.”

His one-word command both bristled and intrigued. “Why?”

“I want to talk to you.”

He was sitting in one of the reading chairs by the fireplace. She walked over and took a seat on the sofa across from him.

“I said something to upset you in your room. Tell me what it was.”

She wasn’t prepared to have this conversation with him. Besides, what would be the point? She couldn’t make him accept what she was. Then again, she wasn’t the coy type—never had been.

“You hurt me, but it’s really not your fault.”

He frowned. “Okay, I don’t get that. Could you be more specific?”

“I know. It’s hard to explain. I guess I needed you to still want me, even though you know I have this demon blood in me. I needed you to accept me anyway, and you didn’t. But I understand why you wouldn’t, so it’s okay.”

He stared at her for the longest time without saying a word. She shifted, growing uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

“You think I don’t want you.”

“Yes.” *No. I think you don’t love me.* God, why were they having this conversation? She couldn’t tell him that.

He stood and came over to her, knelt in front of her.

“It’s more than that, isn’t it?”

She paused, held her breath, then let it out. “Yes.”

“Then tell me.”

“You talked about Nic and Derek, about how they were loved . . .”

“Oh. And I didn’t say I cared about you.”

She felt the smile curve her lips. “You’re perceptive.”

“Not perceptive enough, apparently. I’m a jackass. I’m sorry. It probably came across that *they* could find someone to care about, but you couldn’t. That’s not what I meant, Angie.”

“I know. I should know better, it’s just—”

“Don’t make excuses for me. I’m the one who fucked this all up.” He took her hands in his. “Look. I’ll be as honest as I can be. I do care about you. A lot. But I can’t love anyone. Love scares the shit out of me. It did a number on my mother and I run like hell from it. I always have.”

That was one hell of an admission, and whether he realized it or not, he’d just told her plenty. Her heart swelled. “You’re not your father, Ryder.” She swept a lock of dark hair away from his face. “I really don’t believe you’re anything like him, even though you fear you are. Would your father have put himself in the position you’re in right now, spilling his feelings to a woman?”

He smirked. “Hell, no.”

“Revealing your emotions makes you vulnerable. I can’t see your father—at least, not the man you’ve described to me—doing that. I think there’s a lot more of your mother in you than your father.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “She was always open and honest. And he hurt her because of it; used it against her.”

“Not everyone who says how they feel gets hurt. At some point, if you want to live a normal life—if you want that chance at happiness—you have to learn to trust. It’s who you trust that’s the key.”

“Can I trust you, Angie?”

His voice had lowered, causing a trembling in her lower belly, especially since his hands had started moving from her knees up to her thighs. Heat rose to her chest, her breasts swelling and her nipples tightening against her thin tank top. Her shorts offered no protection against his questing fingers, which crawled their way ever nearer her quickly melting core.

“Yes,” she whispered, nearly out of breath. “You can trust me. Can I trust you?”

“You’d be a fool to trust me,” he said with a wicked grin. “Do you have any idea what I want to do with you right now?”

Her heart pounded, picking up a ramming rate that slammed against her ribs. “Well, I’m no psychic but I have a pretty good idea. But Ryder, the door’s open. We’re in a place where anyone could walk in.”

“I don’t care. I want you. Right here.”

He drew her legs apart and crawled between them, giving her no time to protest. Not that she would have. Not when his body pressed down on her, pushing her back against the couch. Then his mouth was on hers and she moaned against his questing heat, opening her lips to invite his tongue inside.

Hot, wet, needy, she licked at him, whimpered, surprising herself at the flare of desire so strong she no longer cared where they were or who could walk in. Passion took control, and she tangled her fingers in his hair and held on tight as he worked magic with his mouth. With every velvet stroke he told her how desperately he needed her. And she answered, lifting her hips, melting inside, wanting him so badly the flames consumed her.

Ryder dragged his lips from hers, pulled back enough so she could see his face, the harsh lines near the corners of his eyes as he stared down at her. He reached for the waistband of her shorts and jerked them down.

Oh, my. He really was going to do this right here in the library, with the doors wide open. Excitement drilled through her veins. She tugged her bottom lip between her teeth and lifted her hips. He dragged her shorts off, keeping his focus on her face.

“Hurry,” she whispered, not certain if she was more concerned about someone walking in or if she simply needed him inside her.

He unzipped his pants, pushed them down his hips and pulled her to the end of the sofa. With one thrust, he was buried inside, filling her, expanding inside her in a way that shocked her.

Sensation exploded as she pulsed around him. He paused, not moving, and she felt every nerve ending pulse.

She could barely breathe. Ryder stared down at her, his eyes dark, intense, and so compelling. It was at these moments that he revealed so much to her with his eyes. He rested his palm under her breast, not even bothering to lift her shirt, but dragged his thumb over one erect nipple. She shuddered, feeling the sensation all the way to her toes.

Then he moved against her, slow and easy, and it was maddening, as if he wanted to torment her with this rhythm.

She lifted, grinding against him in a shameless way. She didn't care; she was that desperate for the contact.

“Please.”

His lips curled in a devastating smile. Did he have any idea what that did to her? Her belly did flip-flops when he looked at her that way. God, the man radiated heat. And when he moved inside her, cupping his hands under her butt to draw her closer—oh, yes, that's exactly what she needed. She fluttered around him, swept away by the pleasure he gave her. He hit the sweet spot and rubbed against her, smiling as she started to pulse wildly around him.

“Come on,” he whispered.

She gripped his shoulders, lifted, gritted her teeth to fight back a scream. Her whole body tightened as she climaxed with an out-of-control shudder. Ryder's fingers dug into the soft flesh of her buttocks, holding her in his taut grip as she trembled and panted, taking him with her as she rocketed into a wild orgasm that left her breathless.

Ryder lay on top of her—at least, the upper half of his body. She stroked his damp hair and smiled.

Wow. That had been intense. And utterly pleasurable.

And now she realized how vulnerable they were.

“Ryder. We should get dressed.”

He lifted, smiled at her. “I’m dressed.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed at him. He moved away and she jumped up, grabbed her shorts, and put them on, her gaze focused on the doorway.

“You’re safe, darlin’. No one came in.”

“We were lucky,” she said, smoothing back her hair.

“You enjoyed the danger.”

She leveled a grin at him. “You’re right. I did.”

He grabbed her, pulled her to him, and planted a long kiss on her lips that had her melting all over again. When he pulled away, she was shaking.

“We should go to bed and get some sleep,” he said.

She nodded and turned to follow him up the stairs toward the bedrooms, blissfully and ridiculously happy when he held her hand the entire way.

She wanted to ask him, but she wouldn’t. It made her heart hurt she wanted it so badly, but she still wouldn’t ask.

When he reached the door to her room, he turned the knob and pushed it open.

She pivoted to say something, but he pushed her inside, followed her in, and used the heel of his boot to kick the door shut behind him.

Angelique felt a thrill of happiness so intense it made her heart tumble. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to sleep with you. Do you have a problem with that?” He pulled his shirt off.

She reached for the hem of her tank top, realizing as she did that she was falling madly in love with Ryder.

Foolish. She knew it, but couldn’t help herself.

“No. No problem at all.” She let her shorts drop to the floor, backed up to the bed and held her arms out to him.

He followed, lifting his lips in that dangerous grin that melted her all over.

This was the worst possible time in her life to fall in love. Especially with a man who’d made it clear he couldn’t love her.

And she didn’t care. She’d love him anyway.

For as long as they had.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It shouldn't take more than half a day at most to retrieve the black diamond and get back here," Dalton said to Isabelle.

She nodded. "I'll be fine."

"I've made arrangements for you to wait in the chapel," Michael said. "You'll be safe in there. It's the most sacred part of the castle."

"Whatever you think is best."

Angelique was worried about Isabelle. She looked pale. She kneeled down next to her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm tired and a little freaked out by all this. I just want it to be over. Go get the black diamond so Michael can do his testing on me. Once we figure out whether or not I'm some freakazoid demon, I'll feel better."

Angelique sighed and squeezed Isabelle's fingers. "You're no more freak than I am."

Isabelle snorted. "Whatever. Just go."

"Dalton, take Isabelle to the chapel," Michael said. "We'll start loading up the vehicle."

Dalton nodded. Isabelle frowned, but stood, letting go of Angelique's fingers.

"I'll be back soon," she said to Izzy, but her sister had already left the room.

Angelique's stomach tightened. She didn't like this feeling.

Dalton walked quietly alongside Isabelle, wishing there was something he could say to make her feel better.

“I’m not going to lie to you,” he said.

“Really? I don’t see why not. You did plenty of it before.”

He stopped in the middle of the hall and grabbed her wrist, ever mindful of the zing of electricity that still existed between them. “I’m sorry. I did what I had to do.”

She pulled her hand away and rubbed the spot on her wrist where he’d touched her. “And sex was part of that.”

“I’m not going to apologize for making love to you, Isabelle. And I think we both know this attraction is mutual. But it had nothing to do with my assignment. I did it because I wanted to.”

“If I’d known who you were it wouldn’t have happened. You used me. You had sex with me to get close to me so I’d trust you. You only wanted the book.”

Her pain stabbed at him. “Yes, I wanted the book. But I didn’t have to make love to you to get the book. I wanted you.”

“But it sure made it easier, didn’t it?”

“No, it actually made it more difficult.”

Her gaze held his for long seconds. He felt her hesitation, as if there was more she wanted to say. But she turned and started walking away. “Spare me your guilt trip, Dalton. You and the Realm of Light got what you wanted. I’m here, I’m your guinea pig. Just drop me off in the chapel and go get the black diamond.”

Dalton sighed and they resumed walking.

They arrived at the chapel and Dalton pushed open the heavy wooden doors and led Isabelle inside.

He hated seeing her like this, hated knowing he'd caused her such misery.

She took a seat on one of the old wood pews and stared straight ahead at the altar, refusing to acknowledge him.

"You need anything, there'll be one of the Realm guards posted outside. Don't leave this chapel until we get back. It's for your safety."

"Uh-huh."

He wanted to hold her, to kiss her again. She'd been so vibrant, smiling, full of life when he'd met her. A mass of contradictions wrapped up in one compelling package. He'd wanted to know more about her, to take time to learn her.

Now she was like an empty shell.

He'd get the old Isabelle back. Even if it meant her walking away from him, he'd make sure she was happy again. Hopefully this test with the black diamond would help.

He walked out of the chapel and closed the door, nodding to the guard who took position at the doorway.

As he walked down the long hallway back to the castle, he felt empty inside. Just like Isabelle, he imagined.

Dalton wished things were different. But he of all people knew some things were set in stone and couldn't be changed.

"I feel them both," Tase said, allowing a sharp smile of satisfaction. He could taste the weakness within them at the same time he felt the power of the black diamond surging to life. "My fellow brothers, it's time to move. They are vulnerable."

“Our demons are in place and ready,” Aron said. “We can move in now.”

Tase raised his hand. “Be patient. Instruct them not to move too quickly.”

Aron frowned. “We can take them.”

Tase shook his head. “Not yet. One will come to us. All we have to do is wait. The other we will have to fight for. But wait until the time is right. Too soon and we will lose what we came for. I don’t want to do that.”

They were so close to having everything. Everything.

Soon the Realm would lose all they held dear.

And for the Sons of Darkness, supreme rule would begin.

As they approached the old church, Angelique felt a sense of peace settle over her. That’s how she’d known this would be the perfect spot to hide the black diamond. It had felt right, and when she’d met Father Vintaldi she’d known immediately she could trust him.

Though he was old—had to be in his seventies at least—Father Vintaldi looked healthy and robust and more than fit enough to defend his church. In fact, there was a sparkling vitality about him that made him look youthful. Maybe it was his engaging smile.

He’d welcomed her at the gates, brought her inside the church, and she’d been surrounded by a peaceful calm the entire time. She’d felt safe there, and knew the black diamond would be as well.

She’d confided in him that she was in trouble, that dark forces were after the rock—and really, that’s all it looked like, a useless rock. For all she knew he thought she was an utter lunatic, but he swore he’d hide it in the church until she returned for it, and he’d give it to no one but her.

She’d believed him.

“I can’t believe you handed over the black diamond to a stranger,” Ryder grumbled as they pulled up to the front gate.

The town was so small the road wasn’t even paved, and as they parked and got out, a hot breeze kicked up and a cloud of dust swirled around their feet.

“I went with my instincts, Ryder,” she explained. “Sometimes you just have to trust people.”

He rolled his eyes at her as they pushed the ancient iron gates open. They gave with a rusty creak.

The church stood proud and beautiful, its stone façade and white spire the tallest thing in the small town. Perched high on a hill overlooking—or, as it seemed, protecting—the homes and townspeople, it stood guarding the giant volcano Mount Etna, which towered over the church. As she stood back and admired the architecture, Angelique was awed by the fact that, despite constant eruptions and lava flow, this church had stood the test of time.

They had just reached the double doors of the church when they opened. Father Vintaldi’s grin greeted her.

“Miss Deveraux. So nice you have returned to us.”

“*Buona mattina, Padre,*” she said. “*Come siete?*”

“*Benissimo.* Fine. Fine.” He waved his hands, motioning them all toward him. “Come inside, *per favore.*”

“*Grazie, Padre.*” Once inside the cool shade of the church foyer, she said, “These are my friends. Michael, Ryder, Dalton, Mandy, and Trace.”

“*Buona mattina.* Any friends of Angelique’s are welcome here. Please, come in to my office. I have coffee.”

Michael cleared his throat. “*Grazie, Padre,* for the offer, but I’m afraid we can’t stay.”

Father Vintaldi's face fell. "Oh, that's too bad." His lips lifted in a genuine smile again. "We don't often get visitors here."

Angelique's stomach clenched. "I'm sorry. I wish I could stay longer. I just came for the . . . rock you've been holding on to for me."

"Ah. Yes." He nodded. "It's been quite safe here."

"No one has come inquiring after it?"

The priest turned questioning eyes toward her. "Of course not. Just you bringing it here and now showing up again to retrieve it. We get very few visitors except for the town's parishioners. Follow me."

Angelique slanted a smug glance at Ryder, who shrugged and followed her.

Father Vintaldi led them into the church, down the main aisle, and up to the altar. Angelique crossed herself and genuflected as they climbed the cracked marble steps and turned to the left.

"I hid it in a secret room under the altar," he said, keeping his voice hushed. "It's accessible through my office. *Un momento, per favore.*" He took out a key, unlocked the door, and stepped inside a dark room. Moments later, he returned with the bag Angelique had originally placed the black diamond in. "Here it is."

"Thank you, *Padre*. I will come back and visit soon. Now we must go."

He motioned them to a side door. They exited into the bright sunshine and down the walkway.

Once outside, Michael frowned. "We need to get moving."

"What's wrong?" Ryder asked.

"We need to get to the car. Now" was all Michael said.

Picking up on his sense of urgency, Angelique grasped Father Vintaldi's hands. "*Grazie, Padre*. Please, go inside the church and stay in there."

“Something evil comes?”

“*Si*. Please, *Padre*, go inside. Hurry.”

“God go with you all.” Father Vintaldi made the sign of the cross with his hand, then hurried up the walk toward the side of the church. Angelique watched him open the door and step inside, then close it behind him. She refused to budge until she heard the click of the lock, wanting to be certain the old priest was safe. He had risked his life hiding the black diamond for her.

“Move, Angie.” Ryder grabbed her elbow and hurried her along the rocky path of the side road toward the SUV, already pulling his weapon. He tossed a sharp glance from one side to the other, as if he knew what he was looking for, but she didn’t see a thing.

Michael and Dalton were already at the vehicle, Mandy and Trace standing guard around it, weapons drawn. The doors were open and Angelique and Ryder were only ten feet away.

That’s when the demons materialized right in front of them, blocking them from the SUV.

Damn. And she was holding the bag with the black diamond. Why hadn’t she handed it off to Michael? Then it would have been safe.

Everything happened so fast, she didn’t have time to think. Ryder pushed her behind him and leveled his gun on the demons. She wore the special sunglasses and ear devices Ryder had given her for protection, so the sonic blast toward the demons only made her jump, didn’t hurt her ears. She took two steps back, wanting to give him room to fire.

That’s when she heard Dalton and Trace shout the warning, but it was too late.

Everything seemed to happen as if it were slow motion, like in a movie. Ryder turned around and leveled his weapon, seemingly at her. But that couldn’t be right.

Then she understood, because at the same time cold hands surrounded her. She turned her head and saw the demons, their leering faces appearing on each side of her.

She didn't even have time to register shock. They were everywhere, all around her. So was the mist—white, yet so thick she couldn't see through it, could no longer see Ryder. The demons, or maybe it was the mist, held her; she couldn't move. The last thing she managed to filter through the thickening mist was more demons surrounding Ryder and the others, but then the mist swallowed her up. Dizziness overcame her and everything went black.

Isabelle sat in the old chapel, her hands clasped in her lap, nothing to occupy her mind for the past few hours except her own thoughts.

Which wasn't a good thing at all, since her thoughts weren't pleasant. It was bad enough she'd memorized every word of her mother's diary. She had a very good memory, so the conversation with Michael and the other demon hunters was fresh in her mind, too.

The Queen of Darkness. One hell of a title, wasn't it? And one she didn't care to have attributed to her.

She'd always wanted to be famous, had craved a big archaeological find—one that would set her up for life. She would grace the cover of magazines. Hollywood would come calling. Maybe they'd even make movies about the great archaeologist and treasure hunter Isabelle Deveraux. And she'd finally make her mother proud of her.

Yeah, she'd had big dreams. But nowhere in her dreams was she going to be crowned Queen of the Demons.

The thought of it made her nauseous.

This whole place seemed ancient. Scary.

She wished Angelique was here, holding her hand, putting her arm around her. She closed her eyes, trying to find that certain something that connected her to her sister.

But it was gone. All she felt was . . . emptiness.

I'm sorry, Angie. I never was a very good sister to you.

Why couldn't things be different?

She laid her palm across her stomach, fighting the sickness that had started about a half hour ago. When she'd first come in here the old church had been drafty and cold, completely cut off from light and warmth. There were no windows in the chapel, the only light from torches along the rows of pews and on the altar.

She'd been chilled to the bone.

But now it was hot in here, and she'd started to perspire. She'd already put her hair up in a clip; could feel the dampness on the back of her neck, the beads of perspiration gathering between her breasts.

She didn't feel well. Something was wrong.

She stretched out on the hard wood bench and curled her knees against her chest, hoping it would help quell the dizziness and nausea. The cool wood felt good against her face, but it wasn't enough. Lying down made it worse, so she sat up again, trying to focus on the altar, hoping the colorful artifacts would distract her from her physical ailments.

Statues of the Virgin Mary, her smiling, forgiving face reaching across the chapel. The crucifix . . . so ancient—was the cross actually made of a pale rose marble? It was beautiful. She'd love to get an up close look at it. She rose, holding on to the pew railings for strength as she made her way toward the front of the church.

She felt weak. The closer she got to the altar, the more her stomach tumbled. Her legs shook, pain and nausea overwhelming her. What was

wrong with her?

She pushed on, forcing her legs to move, but they felt like jelly, threatening to give out from under her. She couldn't do it, finally dropped to her knees in a cold sweat. The room spun around her and she was certain she was going to pass out.

Everything closed in. The church seemed to grow smaller, as if the walls were moving inward. Her vision had gone askew and she swiped her hand across her brow to push away the beads of perspiration dripping down her face.

When she looked up at the altar, she saw demons.

She blinked, rubbed her eyes, looked again.

Gruesome, horrible creatures made their way toward her, their arms outstretched, long claws pointed toward her as if they were coming to claim her.

No. That couldn't be. They said she was safe here. It had to be an illusion. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again.

Demons. Still coming, making slow progress, but advancing with every second.

Panic soared through her body as they inched their way closer.

"Help me," she croaked, but her voice was no more than a whisper. No one would hear her.

Pushing to her feet, forcing her legs to move, she backed away from the altar. Fear snaked its way into the quickly darkening recesses of her mind.

Get out. Get out now. Hurry. They're coming for you.

She couldn't breathe. Her throat constricted. She needed air. Sunlight. Away from those . . . things. Their claws, fangs . . . dear God, they were her worst

nightmare come to life. She kept moving, walking backward, afraid to take her eyes off them.

They weren't supposed to be in here. She had to get away.

Her heart pounded so hard she was afraid it was going to burst from her chest. Fighting to stay upright, she forced strength into her body.

Maybe it had all been a trick. Dalton, Michael, and the others had lured her in here, intending to turn her over to the Sons of Darkness, to be rid of her so they wouldn't have to deal with her.

Angie had probably been in on it, too. She wanted a life free of having to deal with her sister. She'd read Mother's diary, knew what Isabelle was. Angelique was no doubt horrified. Not that Isabelle could blame her. She'd been a burden to her sister her entire life.

Isabelle was all alone now.

Her head hurt. She wanted to cry.

"You can't have me," she growled in a low whisper, pointing at the creatures. They seemed to shimmer in the dim light of the church as they advanced ever so slowly toward her, their tall, thick bodies more menacing by the minute.

Sucking in a breath, she pushed back, step by step, determined not to fall, to make her legs move. If she stopped, they'd be on her.

She didn't know where her strength and resolve came from, but she pulled it from deep within and turned around, running like hell for the double doors leading out of the chapel. She pushed at the heavy wood and the doors swung easily open.

"Hey!"

The guard held out his hands, his eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Get out of my way."

“No. No. You can’t go.”

She stopped, looked up at him, and realized then that he had turned into a demon, too, his face leering at her with those horrible, dripping fangs. He reached for her with his long claws and she pushed with a power she didn’t know she possessed.

The demon guard went flying, crashing against the far wall along the hallway. She heard his grunt as the air rushed out of his lungs. He must have hit his head, because he slumped down to the ground, his eyes closed.

Isabelle shook her head, the visions between reality and whatever was messed up in her head too jumbled. All she knew was that she couldn’t breathe, needed air.

And she was hot. So damn hot. She had to get out of here.

She rushed down the hall, toward the doors leading outside. The windows along the hallway showed no sunlight, only a strange, dark mist swirling near the windows and doors.

A cooling mist. Yes, she needed that relief against her blistering skin.

Running as if her life depended on it, knowing the demons were right on her heels, she turned the short corner and pushed open the heavy door, sucking in great gulps of moisture-tinged air as soon as she stepped outside.

She could breathe out here. As the icy mist enveloped her, she could breathe.

Cold hands touched her, surrounded her, offering relief from the fever.

“Come with us,” they said. “We’ll take care of you.”

She looked up, trying to see them, but her eyes wouldn’t focus.

“I’m so tired,” she said, then closed her eyes, falling into their arms.

Their blissfully cold arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Demons surrounded them. Between the mist and the number of demons coming at them out of nowhere, Ryder was firing so fast he could only hope he didn't hit his own people.

He saw Dalton's face, though, and pivoted, just as demons rose up in a thick cloud and surrounded Angelique.

Shit! He raised his gun, but they enveloped her and disappeared before he could get a shot off, before he could take a step to get to her. In an instant, they were gone, taking the swirling mist along with them.

As well as Angelique.

"Sonofabitch!" He turned again, hitting the lightningquick pure demons with round after round of laser fire, fury fueling him as he stepped over their melted forms to pump more rounds of sonic bullets into a few hulking hybrids who'd popped up as backup to the purebreds.

Smoke filled the air, taking over where the mist had been. Ryder and the other hunters hit the demons with a barrage of laser and sonic blasts, until the remainder of them disappeared.

Not that it mattered. There was no victory here.

The Sons of Darkness had gotten what they came for.

Angelique, and the black diamond, were gone, swallowed in the mist of those new breed of demons. They hadn't had a chance to save her.

Ryder holstered his gun and shouldered his rifle, ignoring the bodies around him.

He did a quick head count, relieved that at least the rest of the hunters were accounted for and seemed to be unharmed.

“That was a smokescreen. Literally and figuratively,” Michael said.

“No shit. Angie’s gone.” Ryder’s gut twisted. He should have held tight to her, even when the demons attacked. He should have taken the bag with the black diamond so the demons would come after him. But he hadn’t. He’d been more concerned with being on the lookout, with acting as a shield just in case . . .

They hadn’t expected the demons to hit them here. Goddamit. This was a church. Hallowed ground. It wasn’t supposed to happen here.

Stupid mistake. Costly fuckup. Where the hell were his brains?

“How are we going to get her back?” Ryder asked, already knowing the answer.

“I don’t know.”

“Caught with our goddamn dicks in our hands,” Dalton said, grimacing. “They made it look easy.”

“I didn’t expect this. Not here, not so close to hallowed ground.” Michael brushed his fingers through his hair, blew out a breath. “It hurt those demons to be on this church property. They wouldn’t have survived it anyway.”

“They survived it long enough to grab Angelique and the black diamond,” Mandy said. “Maybe your notion of them being unable to step foot on sanctified ground is wrong. Maybe they’re able to overcome it somehow.”

There was a silence as the reality of that sunk in.

“Isabelle,” Dalton said.

Ryder saw the look on Dalton’s face, knew what he meant. They jumped in the SUV and Michael tore out of the church grounds, speeding back toward

the castle.

From Dalton's grim expression, Ryder knew what they'd find when they got there.

An hour later, his suspicion was confirmed. The guard was unconscious, the chapel doors were wide open, and Isabelle was gone.

Michael crouched in front of the guard, and roused him. He rubbed his head, started to stand up, but Michael held him by the shoulders.

"Looks like a concussion," he said.

"She was like a crazed animal," the guard said, sitting up and leaning against the wall. "Came barreling through the doors, drenched in sweat, her face flushed. Her eyes were wide and she looked at me like I was the Devil himself. She threw me against the wall like I was nothing." He shook his head. "I cracked my head on the stone and went down. Sorry."

"It's not your fault. None of us expected this," Michael said, helping the guard to his feet. A couple medical personnel rushed down the hallway. "Take him to the infirmary. He needs X-rays, maybe a CT scan."

After the guard left, Michael turned to them. "I'm not sure what happened to Isabelle, but if I had to guess, it sounds like she was lured outside by the Sons of Darkness."

"So we fucked this one up but good," Trace said. "We couldn't protect either of them. Or the black diamond."

"Yes. They've made us look inept. Obviously they knew exactly where and when to hit us. Which isn't a good sign. They've grown stronger." Michael shook his head. "I'm going to have to report this to the other Keepers. And the first thing we're going to have to do is figure out where the Sons of Darkness are holding Isabelle and Angelique."

"If we can even find them," Dalton said.

"We'll find them."

“How?” Ryder asked. “Are you going to gaze into a crystal ball and zoom into their whereabouts? Do you have some kind of sixth sense that links you to them? Tell me, Michael—how exactly do you plan to find them? Are you going to form a committee to discuss options?”

Ryder knew he was this close to losing it. Patience wasn’t his strength. He didn’t want to stand around and analyze this. He didn’t want to discuss it with the other Keepers. He wanted to get out there and find Angelique and her sister.

Frankly, the Sons of Darkness could keep the fucking black diamond.

He just wanted Angie back.

“Ryder, we’ll find them,” Michael said, his voice lowered. But Ryder knew counseling tactics when he heard them.

“I’m not going psycho on you, Michael, so you can quit using that tone with me. But I’m not going to sit here and wait. Come up with something or I’ll start digging holes in the earth and go down there and get her myself.”

“Ryder.” Michael approached, stopped in front of him. “We have people who can find them. Our Keepers and others in the Realm have certain . . . talents.”

Ryder didn’t care if they were circus clowns, as long as they could locate Angelique. “Good. Find them.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll get right on that,” Michael said, his expression flat.

Ryder knew he was being insubordinate. He didn’t care. He felt responsible for Angie being taken. He’d take whatever punishment the Realm wanted to dish out for his defiance, as long as they located her—fast.

Dalton threw his arm around Ryder’s shoulder. “How about I take you upstairs for a drink?”

Ryder let out a sigh. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Michael said. “You both could stand to unwind. As soon as I know something, I’ll let you know. One drink only, though. We might have to move at any minute.”

“Gotcha,” Dalton said, spinning around with Ryder and leading him down the hall. “How about the rest of you?” he asked.

Mandy shook her head. “I’m going with Michael. I’ll let you all know what the Realm has in mind to find them.”

“I’d like to know that, too,” Ryder said, veering toward Mandy.

Dalton held firm to his shoulder. “You need to unwind a little. Mandy will keep us informed.”

Ryder hesitated, then nodded. “You’re probably right. I’d just be in the way right now.”

Trace shrugged. “I’m heading into the lab to see about weapons.”

“Guess it’s just you and me and that drink, then,” Dalton said.

Ryder felt the tension coiled inside him, ready to strike. He knew he was a danger to everyone around him right now, and Dalton was protecting the team by doing whatever it took to distract him.

Fine. Tequila. Whatever. He’d give Michael a few hours at most, then he was going hunting for Angelique on his own, and no one would stop him.

They headed upstairs to the library, where the wet bar was located.

“Shots?” Dalton asked.

“Hell, yeah.”

Dalton grabbed the bottle and two good-sized shot glasses from the wet bar, and poured to the top.

“Thanks for not skimping.” Ryder took his glass, lifted it in a toast, and drained it with one gulp. The thick liquid burned on its way down, but felt good, instantly relieving some of the tightness in his chest.

“Better?”

“It will be after one more.”

Dalton poured. Ryder tossed it down, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Okay, now I might not kill someone.”

Dalton grinned. “Glad to hear it, since I’m the only one close by.” Dalton grabbed the bottle and they took their glasses, sitting in the two chairs by the window.

“We fucked up,” Ryder said, staring at the sofa where he and Angie had made love last night. He could still feel her skin under his hands, could still smell her. She was embedded in him—in his head and, goddamit, in his heart.

He cared about her. Did he love her? Is this what it felt like, this anguished pain deep in his gut? Like part of him was missing when she was away from him?

He didn’t know love. He hadn’t seen much of it in his lifetime. His mother protected him, but all he’d really seen from her was fear. But with Angie . . . she’d shown love to him. The caring, the respect, the warmth and tenderness. She brought out a side of him he hadn’t known existed.

Love. The thought terrified him, yet he wanted Angelique back so he could explore more of it.

“The Sons of Darkness wanted that black diamond bad,” Dalton said, jolting him out of his thoughts.

Ryder stared at the shot glass. “I didn’t see it coming. I didn’t expect to see demons on the grounds of the church.”

“None of us did. It’s not your fault, Ryder.”

“Why would they take Angie? They already tried their experiment on her and the diamond in Australia, and it didn’t work. Isabelle I can understand, but not Angie.”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re using her as leverage to gain Isabelle’s cooperation.”

Ryder nodded. “It’s possible.” He looked at Dalton. “Do you think the Realm will be able to pinpoint their location?”

“Yes, I do. They have people who can tune in to specific individuals’ psychic signatures. I’m sure Michael is working with them right now. We’ll find them.”

Ryder didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure he believed it. All he felt was a sense of emptiness, of guilt. He should have taken care of Angie. Instead, he had let the demons take her. It was the same as thrusting her into their hands.

What was she thinking right now? What were they doing to her? Was she okay?

He lay his head in his hands.

“Ryder, if they don’t . . . we will.”

That’s what he needed to hear. He lifted his head. “We’re destroying the black diamond. No experiments. That’s our leverage. Without it, Angie and Isabelle are unnecessary to the Sons of Darkness.”

Dalton’s gaze met his; he nodded. Just like that, they had an understanding. That was solid. Real. He believed Dalton.

The clock was ticking.

He grabbed the bottle and poured another shot.

“Okay, we have something.”

Ryder put the glass down and turned to Michael. "You found them?"

"One of our people picked up Angelique's signature."

"Isabelle?" Dalton asked.

Michael shook his head. "Nothing yet, but they're still working on her. It's possible they have her hidden beyond what we can pick up. We're assuming they're in the same location, so let's start with Angelique."

"Fine," Ryder said. "Where?"

"It's a remote castle, up the coast, much like this one."

"Isn't it unusual for them to be aboveground?" Ryder asked. "I thought they dwelled underground."

"They do. And yes, it is. We don't understand it, either. So we'll just have to go check it out."

Ryder hated when the bad guys didn't operate according to standard. That signaled a trap. He didn't like this.

"The castle is well protected," Michael continued, "so we'll need reinforcements. I've already alerted Lou. He's bringing a few of the others. We'll meet them at the castle."

"Let's weapon up," Ryder said, already feeling the rush of impending battle, glad to be doing something other than drinking to drown the misery and guilt. Inactivity sucked.

Action rocked.

They were going to get Angelique.

"You know they're coming," Badon said.

“Of course I do.” Irritated, Tase let the flames lick out, one tendril of fire slapping like a whip toward his brother. Badon stepped back, avoiding that which would cause him excruciating pain.

Tase hated being second-guessed. His brothers needed to learn their place.

“I feel their power.”

“You underestimate ours, Badon. And especially mine.”

He knew exactly what he was doing. Of course they were coming.

His plan was working perfectly.

The Realm was stupid.

And in many ways, so were his brothers—the reason they had not been successful so far.

Was no one fit to lead but him? Could no one match his skills, his cunning? Could they not see what he was doing?

The Sons of Darkness were going to win. The Realm was chasing ghosts.

They’d figure it out soon enough.

“Go back to your assigned tasks, Badon. I have this covered.”

Badon hesitated as if he would speak further. Tase let him know of his displeasure by flaming the entire room. His brother made a hasty exit. Badon would have wounds from this.

Tase was sure his laughter rang in his brother’s ear all the way down the corridor.

Ryder studied the castle from their position several hundred yards away. A typical touristy-type place, built over an open, sandy beach, the crystal blue

waters of the Ionian surrounding it.

From a battle perspective, it was well guarded. The beach was easy to watch, so no doubt the castle had been intended as a lookout for attacks from the sea. No one could bring a boat up onto the beach without being seen from the castle turrets. Water on three sides, a hilly expanse of brush, cactus, and insurmountable wall on the other.

Not impossible, but not easy, either.

“We come at it from the hill,” Ryder said. “Through the brush.”

“Cactus,” Dalton pointed out.

“Yeah. Sucks, but doable. It’s dense, but we can weave our way through it, especially if we stay low. There are fewer stickers near the ground.”

“Sounds delightful,” Mandy said. “I’ve always wanted cactus stickers in my ass.”

Trace snorted. “I can pull those out for you, love.”

Mandy rolled her eyes. “Keep dreamin’, stud.”

Ryder checked his watch. “When are the others arriving?”

“Soon,” Michael said.

They’d already been up the hill as far as they could, looking to see if there was an outpost of guards. Nothing. The castle was deserted, or so it seemed. Ryder knew better. It wasn’t like the Sons of Darkness were going to post demons outside in the hot sunlight. Though the thought of demons liquefying in the sun made him smile. He’d pay money to see that.

A sharp crack of someone stepping on a stick made him pivot, lift his weapon.

He relaxed when he saw Lou, the Keeper who’d brought him on board to the demon hunters. Behind Lou were some of the other hunters—ones he

knew—Derek and Gina, Rico and his brother Rafe, and Punk.

“I’m glad to see you guys.”

Lou nodded. “Sorry it took us so long. We had to come down from Rome.”

“Anything going on there?”

“Demon hunting,” Punk said with a smart-ass grin.

“Kill any?”

Punk shrugged and ran a hand over his dark spiky hair. “Don’t we always?”

Gina grinned. “I hear you’ve got some new breed of demon.”

“Yeah. Lou fill you in on them?”

Derek slung an arm around Gina’s shoulder. “Something about them appearing in the mist—our standard weaponry doesn’t work, but silver hurts them.”

“You got it.”

“Fun stuff,” Punk said. “Let’s go kill something.”

“You’ll get your chance, Punk,” Lou said. “Patience.”

“Lou, you know that’s not my thing.”

Ryder fought a smile. He liked Punk. Probably because Punk enjoyed killing demons, and that’s pretty much what made his day. Ryder understood that concept. He couldn’t disagree with Punk, either. That’s exactly what Ryder was in the mood for. Get in, kill demons, and get the women out of there.

Along with destroying the black diamond.

Lou had moved over to Michael. Their heads were bent together and they were whispering.

Keeper strategizing and sharing of secrets, no doubt. Which was fine. They could do whatever they wanted as long as the end result was getting Angie out of that castle. Ryder's rifle rested in the cradle of his arms, his fingers itching to pull the trigger. It couldn't be soon enough for him. But he understood the need for patience and strategy. He hated it, but it was necessary to the success of a mission.

Michael turned to them. "Though we hate to wait until nightfall because we know the demons are more active then, it's too risky to try to make a move on the castle during daylight. As soon as the sun sets, we'll crawl through the cover of the cactus field, then use the brush on the hillside to disguise us. We'll come up the front and get in that way."

"Are we using stealth to make our way in, or blasting?" Derek asked.

"There are three entries from the hillside," Lou said, spreading the map out. "Front door, side kitchen entrance, and servants' over here on the west." He slid his laptop around to show them the outlay of the house. "We'll split the teams, create a diversion at the front door, then slip in hunters through the other two entrances."

"Looks like a cellar or basement here." Ryder pointed so they could all see what he referenced.

Lou nodded. "Exactly. My guess, since demons prefer underground, is that they're holding Angelique and Isabelle somewhere down below. Focus your team's efforts there, Ryder. Derek, you and Gina take the main floor. Punk, you're on the upper floors with yours, and for cover for Ryder's team."

"Got it," Punk said.

Their assignments in order, they spent time discussing possible scenarios, how to handle what could go wrong, and then Michael opened up an oversized duffle bag, handing out pistols and clips along with boxes of ammo.

Ryder took the ammo and slid it open, then looked up at Michael. “Silver bullets?”

Michael’s lips curled. “Yeah. In case we face any of the new types of demons.”

“Just like silver kills werewolves in the movies,” Punk said, using the heel of his hand to jam in the clip. He cocked the slider back and loaded one in the chamber.

“Hey, I did that in one of my movies,” Gina said with a wide grin.

“Only this time you get real silver bullets,” Derek added.

“Sort of,” Michael said. “Only these aren’t werewolves. They’re much worse.”

“Do we have any idea what they are?” Punk asked. “I like to know what I’m fighting.”

“They’re not any kind of demon we’ve seen before,” Michael said. “And we haven’t had nearly enough exposure to them to know where they came from or what their purpose is. We’re lucky enough that Ryder and Angelique have had some one-on-one time with them so we at least know one of their weaknesses and how to combat them.”

Punk shoved an elbow in Ryder’s ribs. “Yeah, lucky you.”

Ryder arched a brow. “You jealous?”

“You know it.”

“Angelique saved my life. She took on a demon with her bare hands,” Ryder threw out there.

Punk grimaced. “Damn. I might like that woman.”

Ryder laughed. “Forget it. She’s mine.”

And just like that, he realized he'd claimed her, had stated his feelings about Angelique. Right in front of all these people, without second thoughts about saying it. It had just fallen out of his mouth. Easily, without any effort.

He waited for the stares, the questioning looks, even the questions.

"Too bad. She sounds more like my type. When a demon kills you, I'll be sure to be around to comfort her. A few days with a real man like me, she'll forget all about you."

There were times Ryder was really thankful for Punk's bizarre sense of humor. Now was one of them. He laughed and turned away, hoping that was the end of talk of Angie and him.

If anyone else had thoughts on the topic, no one said a word or gave him a strange look. They just busied themselves with their weapons. A few smiled at Punk's comment. Derek just nodded and gave Ryder a knowing smile, then resumed checking his weaponry.

Maybe the only one it had been a big deal to had been Ryder. Hell, for him to say what he'd said had been freakin' monumental. Of course no one would know that but him.

"Hey."

He looked up at Punk.

"Yeah?"

"If you're through mooning over your woman, how about we go kill some demons so you can get her back?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Isabelle woke in the darkness, shooting straight up to a sitting position. Fear snaked its way around her, along with the certain realization she was alone. The only sound she heard was her own breathing.

She remembered the church, the feeling of claustrophobia and sickness and needing to escape. Then the cooling mist and cold hands over her, bringing relief from the heat blistering her body. After that, only blackness and waking up here.

But where was here?

“Angie?”

Instinct told her she wasn’t back at the Realm’s castle. She shuddered. Something bad had happened to her. But what? It was so dark. She couldn’t even see her hand in front of her. She felt around, underneath her. Cloth, kind of scratchy. Some kind of bed. No, not even that. A ledge, hard underneath. With tentative movements she swung her leg over the side, feeling for the floor.

Cold. Everything in here was icy cold. She pulled the blanket around her for warmth, afraid to leave the relative safety of the ledge, not knowing what was out there in the darkness.

Damn. She hated this. Where was Angelique? Dalton? Anyone.

What had happened to her back at the church?

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw a faint outline of a table in front of her. She squinted, wishing for light so she could see better.

As if someone had heard her wish, faint light began to appear, illuminating the room. But there were no overhead lights, not even any fixtures, so she had no idea where it was coming from.

There was a long gray stone table, crude and ancient as if hand-carved. At the end of the table nearest her was a misshapen rock about the size of a small boulder.

The room itself was large, with rough rock walls and nothing else in it but the ledge she sat on and the table. The floor was made out of the same rock, though it was smoother than the jagged walls, so if she walked on it she wouldn't cut her bare feet.

She glanced to the side of the ledge and found her shoes, slipped them on, scanned the room again, and looked for a door. There was one at the far end of the room. She pushed off the ledge and made her way to the door.

No doorknob. Just a smooth slab. She pushed on it but it wouldn't budge. She pushed it again, digging her feet into the ground, using every ounce of strength she had, but she knew her efforts were fruitless.

Her stomach knotted and she laid her forehead against the cool stone door, tears welling in her eyes.

"Please, someone let me out of here."

The door began to vibrate and Isabelle jumped, backing against the wall as the door pulled away.

Frustration was replaced with abject fear as men filled the doorway. Large men clad in all black.

She backed into the room as they stepped in, their faces devoid of expression, their eyes dark and cold as they focused on her.

They were huge, extreme power vibrating off them as they filled the room, surrounding the table. Isabelle moved back to the ledge, every nerve ending in her body shaking with fear.

Who were they?

One in particular, his long, black hair pulled back in a queue, his eyes dark with menace, smiled at her as he stood at the opposite end of the table. He made a slight bow of his head toward her.

She felt heat in the room, barely contained, but it was coming from that one man.

“Isabelle.”

Oh, shit. He knew her name. She could barely breathe, couldn’t move. She’d never been more scared in her entire life.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, his voice deep, yet not at all menacing. “We’re not going to hurt you. My name is Tase.”

She swallowed, her throat so dry it hurt. Her fingers clutched the blanket in a tight grip.

“I am the leader of the Lords of the Sons of Darkness. These are my brothers, and we welcome you.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God. This couldn’t be happening. This wasn’t real. She was dreaming. And yet she knew it was true. She felt the power in the room. Suffocating. Overwhelming. Dark. Her throat was dry. She felt sick.

“I know what you must be thinking, but rest assured no one in this room will harm you. On the contrary, we wish only for you to join with us. You have the opportunity to be our queen, to have power that most can only imagine.”

Isabelle swallowed again, unable to speak. What would she say if she could? She wanted no part of this. This was evil. It was hell. It was the nightmares of childhood dreams. The bogeyman coming to get her. She pulled the blanket up to her chest, as if it could somehow shield her from this evil.

Tase tilted his head to the side, studied her, and nodded.

“I understand your fear. This is all too much for you. We will leave shortly, so relax, child. We only need you to lay your hand upon the black diamond, and we will make our departure.”

He inclined his head toward the dark rock at her end of the table.

That was the black diamond? The one Dalton had told her about? The thing they were supposed to test, to see if she had any reaction with it. How did the Sons of Darkness get it?

“Where’s my sister?” she croaked.

“She is safe.”

Oh, no. They had Angie. “Please don’t hurt her.”

“Anything you wish for can be yours to command. All you have to do is merge with the black diamond.”

Merge. She didn’t like that word at all. It sounded like some kind of ceremony. She pulled her knees up to her chest and shook her head.

Tase inhaled sharply. She felt a whiplash of anger, then his shoulders relaxed and he once again gave her a benevolent smile. But that smile didn’t reach his eyes. “No hurry. There’s plenty of time. We’ll leave it with you, and you will change your mind. Soon enough, you won’t be able to resist its lure.”

“I don’t want anything to do with that thing.”

His lips curled. “Isabelle. You have your father’s blood in you. He was a magnificent demon—a Lord with all the power of darkness at his command. One of our brothers. You and I—all of us—we are family.”

“No. I have a family. And it’s not you.” She wouldn’t play his game, refused to let them brainwash her.

“You are meant to be with us.”

“What about my sister?”

“She doesn’t have the strength you do. She is of no use to us. You . . . you are the one with the power. We need you at our side. It is you who will rule with us, Isabelle.”

Tase motioned to the other men and they began to file out. After they had gone, Tase stared at her, his eyes glowing a dark red, seeming to shoot straight into her mind.

He really was a demon. His eyes. His face, changing shape right before her.

She felt heat, singeing her, burning her from the inside out. It was both frightening and seductive as she saw what could be hers. Power, money, fame. Everything she’d ever wanted. All she had to do was think about what she wanted, and it would materialize.

“Yes, Isabelle. It could all be yours. Just touch the diamond and let it empower you. You have a legacy to fulfill. It is only a matter of time.”

Tase turned and walked out, the stone door closing in place behind him.

Shaken, Isabelle was frozen to the ledge, unable to move. They were playing with her mind. They knew her weaknesses, tortured her with talk of her father.

Was her father really one of the Sons of Darkness? Did she have a legacy? Was it preordained that she would become one of them? Was it true that she and Angelique were different?

Didn’t she already know the answer to that? Hadn’t she always known?

She stared at the black diamond. It was just a hunk of rock. How could it be so powerful? What secrets did it hold? Did she dare touch it? Did she have the power that Tase mentioned, or was that all mindwash bullshit?

She wished Dalton were here. Of all people, he was the one to offer her comfort. She felt safe with him. She could crawl into his lap and his arms would wrap around her, shield her from this hurt, from the evil.

Dalton could protect her. She didn't understand why, but she knew he could. He'd betrayed her, and yet she felt comforted whenever he was near. How fucked-up was that?

Still, there had been . . . something between them. A spark, a connection. He seemed to understand the darkness. And he didn't judge her for it.

She needed to talk to him. Why hadn't she let him help her? Why had she let her pride and hurt get in the way of reaching out to him? Now she needed him and he wasn't here.

"Help me," she said to the empty room, clutching the sides of her head.

Find your way back to Dalton. He's your salvation.

No. Look at the diamond. Touch it. See how close it is? Everything you've wanted can be yours. Think of Atlantis. You can have it all. Everyone who said you couldn't—all you've been denied—will be yours. Fame, riches, all the dark delights you desire.

Don't do it, Isabelle. Find Dalton. Dalton can save you.

"Stop it!" She cupped her ears, trying to drown out the voices.

Pain ripped inside her, tearing her in two. And still, the voices inside her head wouldn't go away. Conflicting, they pulled at her, leading her down different roads.

She lifted her head, studied the black diamond. From an archaeological standpoint, it wasn't at all remarkable. It looked like a huge chunk of coal, a disappointing lump in her stocking at Christmas, albeit a rather oversized one.

Why did everyone place such importance on it? It was just a rock. A dead, lifeless hunk of granite and sand. Void of life or any magic, it couldn't do her any harm. They were wrong. Nothing was going to happen. She'd prove it.

Then they'd let her go.

She stood, tossed the blanket to the ledge, refusing to let fear rule her. She'd never been afraid—of anything—and refused to start now.

Okay, so she'd never been faced with demons before. Dear Lord in heaven, could they really be evil incarnate? Had she actually stood alone in a room with sons of the devil? And where was she, anyway?

Too many questions. *Focus on one task at a time, Isabelle. Just like you're working a dig.* Back to the rock.

She took one step, waiting to see if it would . . . come to life.

Nothing happened. It sat there on the table, lifeless.

What did she expect? For it to jump at her?

Honestly.

Approaching the table, she rested her hip against it.

There. Now she was inches from it, and felt no spark, no life emanating from the black diamond.

"This is ridiculous." She reached out and placed her hands over the rock.

She could have sworn it moved, but that had to be her imagination.

But then she heard a distinctive hum, low at first, then gradually growing in intensity. And under her palms, a vibration.

She hadn't imagined that. It was real.

Her hands were glued to the black diamond, her gaze mesmerized as the lifeless rock began to glow from within. First the tiny pinprick of a sapphire blue light, then as it spread throughout the stone, brightening to an ocean blue.

It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. And when she felt tiny electric sparks shooting out from the diamond into her hand, felt the power

of it enter her, she sensed no fear.

It was giving her energy, empowering her, welcoming her. How could she be afraid of something like that?

And yet, something within it both compelled and repulsed her, as if there were a life force buried within this rock that wanted out.

Wanted her.

Was this the prophecy her mother had spoken of in her diary? That she would one day take that final step into darkness?

Her mother feared that evil would consume her.

As Isabelle watched, mesmerized by the swirling blue light within the diamond, feeling its strength merge with hers, she was afraid her mother was right.

Because while the light absorbed into her, she was engulfed by darkness.

And she liked it.

Angelique paced the tiny room, wondering if this was going to be her prison, anticipating the moment demons would walk through the door and . . .

And what? Kill her? Use her and Isabelle to make the black diamond spring to life? She didn't think that was why she was there. She had a suspicion, and she didn't like it.

She wrapped her arms around her middle and resumed her pacing, trying to stay focused, to imagine the possibilities of rescue by the Realm of Light. They were going to find her. They weren't going to just leave her here in this . . .

Wherever *here* was. She remembered walking out of the church, the black diamond in the bag on her shoulder. Then demons attacked, and she backed up to give Ryder room to fight. In an instant, demons surrounded her with their icy hands, pulling her with them until everything went dark.

Then nothing else until she woke in this cold, barren room with no windows and no freaking door. How did she even get in here? She wished she knew something, had contact at least with Isabelle.

But that wasn't going to happen. Her sister wasn't here. Whatever building this was, Izzy wasn't here. She felt it, knew it to be true.

And the darkness in her sister was growing.

The black diamond had roared to life again.

The sudden realization shocked her, raising goose bumps on her already chilled skin.

Isabelle was with the black diamond. Her sister had touched it, had brought it to life.

How did Angelique know this? How could she feel her sister, and more important, the black diamond?

Because she'd laid her hands on it in the cave when it was alive and glowing? Had that made her somehow . . . part of it?

She shuddered at the thought. There was evil in that thing. She remembered how it felt to lay her hands on it, the seductive sense of power it held. She hadn't wanted to let go; she was both enraptured and horrified by the gem. Thank God Ryder had been there to pull her away from it.

But had she been somehow linked to it? Or was her link to Isabelle, and that's how she knew?

Because this was way more than simply a feeling. She could almost see her sister, her eyes wide with a sense of power and madness as she laid her hands over the black diamond. And whatever force lived within the black

diamond was trying to embed itself within Isabelle, sharing its power with her.

Please, Isabelle. Fight it. Don't give in.

Angelique leaned against the wall and sank to the floor, wishing she could summon the same powers she'd used against that demon who'd tried to kill Ryder. Where was all that strength now? She'd pounded and pushed against the wall for hours, with no success.

Had that whole manifestation of demon power been a onetime thing? A blood rush of her father's genetics that she had no control over? It would be nice if she could figure out how to harness it and use it when she wanted to.

Like now would be a good time.

She needed to get out of here and find Isabelle. Before it was too late for her sister.

They were graced with a moonless night and a thick cover of clouds overhead. It was about damn time luck was on their side.

"Ready to storm the castle?" Punk raised his weapon and waggled his brows.

Ryder nodded, anxious to just get in there, kill some demons, and get Angelique out. They all had their assignments, knew what to do. His fingers clenched and relaxed on the trigger while he waited for Michael and Lou to give them the go-ahead.

He preferred working alone. If it had been up to him, they'd be in there by now. But he was also realistic enough to know that this demon hunt wasn't a one-man operation. Not if you wanted to come out of it alive.

"Thermal imagery points to at least forty demons in there," Lou said, his features showing what the rest of them felt.

The situation was grim. There was an area under the castle heavily occupied with demons. They assumed that's where the women were being held, but Lou hadn't been able to pick them up on the scanners. It didn't mean they weren't in there, just probably being held in a room that was either too thick or too cold. Either would prevent their scanning equipment from picking up their images.

Ryder had gotten what he needed to know, though. The layout of the castle, and where the bulk of the demons were located. Sure enough, they were aboveground.

Really strange for subterranean dwellers.

"We take out the ones above floors first," Michael instructed. "Then we head downstairs. No one goes down there until I give the signal. Understood?"

Once everyone checked in with an affirmative, they moved.

About damn time, too. Ryder and Dalton took the lead, inching forward on bellies and elbows through the cactus patch.

"Careful," he commed. "Some of the stickers are low. And if you get stuck, just suck it up and don't holler like a baby."

No less than thirty seconds later, he heard Punk growl and whisper a string of obscenities.

"Guess I'll have to take the tweezers to you later, huh, Punk?" Mandy teased.

His only response was another low growl.

Getting through the cactus was slow and tedious. Ryder and Dalton made sure to stop and survey the house, but it was completely dark. Not that demons needed the light to see. He figured they were expecting them, so he had to make sure not to give the Sons of Darkness any heads-up that the

hunters were on the way. And that meant low to the ground, no matter how painful it was for everyone.

Besides, the crawl through the cactus was only about twenty yards or so, though one would think listening to all the griping that they'd been in there for hours. Ryder was first out, crawling into the middle of a field of thick bushes.

"Stay low," he ordered through his mic, settling into a crouch and grabbing his binoculars as he waited for the others. "Make sure you don't pop your heads up over the tops of the vegetation after you're clear of the cactus field."

They moved just as slowly through the brush and toward the front of the castle. No one was stationed outside the entrance. That was a good thing. The teams split as they had been previously assigned. Ryder went to the side door kitchen entrance and set the explosive, then hid in the bushes with his team and waited for the signal from the front that would be his cue to enter.

"We'll sweep the main floor first," he said to Mandy and Trace. "After we're clear, we'll head downstairs with the other teams. Stay close."

They nodded and braced themselves for the cue, waiting for Gina and Derek to do their thing.

The explosion from the front thundered around them, making the ground underneath their feet tremble.

That was the signal. Ryder blew the door, jumping up and rushing inside. Smoke filled the kitchen, but he'd studied the layout, moving expertly past every object in the room, weapon drawn and ready to fire. He had one thought in mind as he made his way through the smoke-filled rooms—finding Angelique and getting her the hell out of there. He didn't even want to think about what she'd been going through since she'd been there.

Anger soared inside him, so when he spotted the first demon heading toward him, he leveled his weapon and fired, a rush of satisfaction zipping

through him when it howled and began to melt. Demons appeared from every room, both hybrid and pure, all around them. The hunters formed a tight circle and began battling outward. Fury guided him, the need to exact vengeance for their taking her, and for his own failure to protect her.

He fired round after round of UV light, sending demons into melting heaps. The closer they got to him, the more he advanced, putting out wave after wave of the blue light that turned them into nothing but molten jelly. He didn't take time to ponder why it felt so damn good to kill them, he just added to the body count, pushing his way forward, circling around the lightning-fast pure demons that lunged at him, only to pivot and fire at them before they could turn and come at him again.

With machinelike precision he cut through their numbers, wishing he could touch them, feeling this fierce need to go one-on-one, wanting to make them pay for taking what was his. If he could, he'd wrap his hands around their evil throats and squeeze the life out of them.

"We've got the numbers managed here," Michael commed. "Derek, Gina, Punk, Mandy, you stay with me. Ryder and Dalton, lead your team underground."

"Got it." Now was Ryder's chance to rescue Angie and her sister, to grab the black diamond so they could destroy it.

And maybe, if he was lucky, they'd find the Sons of Darkness, too.

He was so ready to take them all down.

"Let's go," Dalton said, nudging him on the shoulder.

Ryder turned and moved with Dalton to the door leading down into the cellar. It was locked. Ryder studied it. Wood. Yeah, whatever. "No time to pick the lock."

"Ready?" Dalton asked.

Ryder nodded, and together they reared back, then kicked the door. It splintered and banged against the wall as it flew open.

“Okay,” Ryder said to the others. “Stay close. There might be a lot more of them down here.”

They took a set of narrow cement stairs that led down quite a ways. It was pitch dark down there. Ryder felt for a light switch, found it, and flicked it, but nothing happened. Figured. At least their glasses gave them perfect night vision.

Once they had all come down, he held up his hand, listening, breathing in to determine the presence of the foul-smelling hybrid demons.

“No hybrids down here,” he said. The room was empty. No doors or other rooms, but there was a hallway that led into what looked like a tunnel. “Okay, we’re heading down here. Get ready to back up in a hurry if we get rushed by demons.”

“You think they’re down this way?” Dalton asked.

“No idea,” Ryder said. “But where else could they be?”

“Underground.”

Ryder grimaced. He hoped that wasn’t the case, because finding them then would be difficult, if not damn near impossible, and would require explosives and some heavy-duty tunneling. “Let’s just hope this leads us to them.”

He and Dalton walked side by side, the rest of the hunters close behind. Other than the sounds of their footsteps on the cement floor, Ryder heard nothing. No voices, no movement. With as many demons as Lou had picked up on his image scanner, Ryder had figured there would be movement, some sound.

“There’s light up ahead,” Dalton said, pointing with the barrel of his laser to the end of the tunnel.

“Yeah, and I just saw a shadow to the right of the tunnel exit. Get ready, everyone.”

They crowded together, and when Ryder gave the signal, they rushed the tunnel exit. Ryder pivoted to the right and Dalton to the left, the rest of them following suit, weapons ready to fire.

No one was there.

“They’ve gotta know we’re here,” Trace said.

“They do.” The room was long, with doors along each side. They looked like they might be the kind used for storage. There were chains and locks on each door.

“Okay, let’s start busting open these doors,” Dalton said.

Ryder nodded. “I’ll take the right, you take the left.” He took half the team with him, the others went with Dalton. “Be ready.”

Lasering the locks open was easy. They pulled the chains, and drew open the heavy doors. Once inside, they found nothing but empty rooms. Ryder and his team checked all six of the rooms on their side, and found them empty.

Shit.

Ryder turned to see Dalton busting open the last room on his side of the corridor. He checked it and came out, shaking his head.

Well, sonofabitch. Where were the women? And the black diamond?

And the goddamn demons?

They gathered in the center of the hallway. “Now what?” Rico asked.

“We missed something,” Ryder said, frowning. “They have to be here.”

“Maybe they left when they heard us coming,” Punk said.

“Could be.” Ryder didn’t like this. If they left, did they take Angie with them?

“What about upstairs?” Dalton suggested.

Ryder shrugged. “That’s as good a suggestion as any. I’m out of ideas. Let’s go. I’ll bring up the rear.”

The others began filing up the stairs, but something stopped Ryder.

A noise. Faint, but enough to make him turn and move back to the center of the room again. When the sounds of the other’s footsteps quieted, he crouched down and listened again.

“Ryder, what are you doing?” Dalton commed. He stood at the top of the stairs, looking down.

“I hear something, Dalton. Give me a minute of quiet.”

“Demons?”

“Don’t think so. Just need a sec.”

“You got it. If you have demons down there, yell and we’re back there.”

“Yeah. I’ll let you know.”

As soon as it quieted down again, he took his ear comm out, craned his head from side to side.

He heard it again, looked down at the floor.

Yelling. Someone was yelling. The sound was muffled, but he could definitely hear it.

It definitely wasn’t demon. It was human.

And it was coming from beneath the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Can you hear me? Help me!” Angelique was screaming now, her voice growing hoarse from shouting as loudly as she could.

She’d heard voices above, the tromp of footsteps moving over her head. They walked like humans. She didn’t know how she could tell the difference. Maybe it was the movement. Fast and deliberate.

So she’d started screaming, hoping they could hear her, praying she wouldn’t be left alone in this cold, dark room.

“I’m down here!” She ran over to the wall, pounded on it, hoping someone would be able to hear the banging.

Please, please find me. Don’t leave me here.

But the footsteps moved away and everything went silent.

Oh, no. Please, God, no. She wanted to cry, to sink to the floor and give up.

Angry at herself, she sniffed and threw back her shoulders. Dammit, she wasn’t going to quit. She swallowed, coating her throat, and started pounding and screaming again.

“Help me! Someone please, I’m down here!” She pounded, over and over again until her hands throbbed.

Then, miraculously, someone pounded back. She heard shouting, as if someone had his mouth right to the floor, trying to communicate to her.

Tears filled her eyes, and she laughed. They’d heard her! She beat her fists against the wall in acknowledgment.

The ceiling around her began to chip away, and she recognized the humming of a laser.

It was the hunters. They were using the laser to melt through the floor above her. She huddled in the corner and averted her gaze from the UV light, staying out of the way as tiny pieces of the ceiling began to fall.

“Angelique? Isabelle?”

She tilted her head back and whispered a prayer of thanks. “Ryder! It’s me.” She ran to the small hole in the ceiling.

“Are you alone or is your sister with you?”

“I’m alone. I don’t know where Izzy is.”

“Okay, we’re going to punch a bigger hole so we can pull you up, because we can’t find any other way down there. Get as far back as you can and cover your head and eyes.”

She moved to the opposite corner and shielded her head and face. Pieces of the ceiling came crashing down. When it stopped, she hurried over to the hole, never happier than to see Ryder peering in at her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you strong enough to hang on to a rope while I pull you up, or do I need to come and get you?”

“I can do it, no problem.” She’d do anything to get out of this prison.

He threw the rope and she wrapped it around her arm and hands, hanging on tight while they drew her up and out. As soon as she was on solid footing again, she threw her arms around Ryder.

“Thank you for hearing me, for finding me.”

He squeezed her tight. “I’m glad I did. You did a good job screaming.”

She laughed and refused to let go, needing to feel human touch. His touch. “Thanks.” When Ryder pulled back and studied her, he frowned, sliding his thumb across her cheek.

She didn’t even realize she was crying.

“Darlin’, are you sure you’re okay?”

She sniffed and nodded. “I was alone. It was cold. Shock and stress, I think. I’ll be fine.”

“Do you remember anything?” Michael asked.

She pulled back and realized there were even more hunters standing around besides Dalton and the others—people she remembered from Australia.

How many people had they brought in to search for her?

She shook her head. “Nothing. After they took me from the church, I woke up down there. No one came in and I couldn’t get out.”

“What about Isabelle?”

Cold dread sank like a lead weight in her stomach. “Izzy isn’t here.”

Dalton frowned over Ryder’s shoulder. “How do you know?”

“I felt her. And the black diamond.”

At their quizzical looks, she said, “Something happened while I was in the room. It was like a sudden awareness of both my sister and the black diamond.” She turned her gaze to Michael. “Isabelle isn’t in this place. She’s somewhere else. And the black diamond is with her. She’s touched it and brought it to life.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ryder asked.

She shrugged. "I can't explain it, but I feel it. It's like a movie playing in my head, thoughts that are occurring in real time."

"Do you know where she is?"

She fought the tears, refused to let them fall again. "No. I see bits and pieces, but not location."

"Let's get out of here," Michael said. "Before we get more visitors. We've got to get Angelique back to the Realm. Then we'll see if we can track Isabelle and the black diamond."

Ryder grabbed Angelique's arm. "Good idea. I'll feel a lot better once Angie's safe."

"I was never in danger, Ryder. They didn't want me." She sat in the library while Ryder paced in front of her. The others were piled in there, too. After they returned, she'd taken a shower and gotten something to eat. Now she was curled up on the sofa with a cup of tea, feeling much warmer than she'd been earlier.

"Don't you see? I was a decoy. You found me easily, just like the Sons of Darkness wanted you to."

Ryder scrubbed his hand over his face. "No, I don't see. And it wasn't so damn easy."

"He probably has cactus spines stuck in his . . . well, wherever," Gina said with a smirk. "We had to crawl through a field. They're all cranky."

Angelique's lips quirked. "I see. I'll work on getting those out later."

Ryder shot a glare at Gina. "Not funny. And I don't have cactus spines on any part of me. I'm irritated at Angie."

"Why?" Angelique asked.

“Because I don’t agree with your assessment of what went down. I think the Sons of Darkness still want to use you.”

She shook her head. “I’m useless to them. That was already proven in Australia. As soon as I laid my hands over the black diamond, the light inside it went dark.”

“Just because you aren’t as powerful as your sister doesn’t mean you don’t have value to the Sons of Darkness,” Lou said. “Remember, you are still the daughter of a Lord, one of the high demons. You are highly revered by them.”

“Lou’s right,” Derek said. “The Sons of Darkness don’t easily let go of their own. I know.”

She didn’t believe that. “That’s not true. Don’t you remember, Lou? Bart cast me aside as if I was nothing to them. And Derek, have they come after you since the incident with Ben?”

Derek shook his head. “No. They haven’t.”

“See? They have no use for me, for Derek, or for Nic, and we all have demon blood. But they do want Isabelle.”

“I have a feeling that some of the Lords might disagree with many of the decisions Bart and Ben had made,” Michael interjected. “The Sons of Darkness have a need for someone of your power. For you and Derek and Nic. I think you’re all vulnerable.”

Frustration ate at her, made her stomach twinge. Why weren’t they out looking for Izzy instead of having this ridiculous discussion? “I have no power. Don’t you think I tried? If I had any useful demon blood in me, why couldn’t I conjure it up to get myself out of that room?”

“Demon power manifests itself in unusual ways, Angelique,” Lou explained. “Both Derek and Nic had to learn that, too. You’re still very young and not in control of your skills yet. None of us knows what you can

do, or can't do, what any of you who are half demon are fully capable of. You may never be able to call it up at will."

They could argue that for hours and it wouldn't locate Izzy. "Either way, now we have to find my sister."

"Yes," Michael said. "And I know where she is."

"You do?"

He nodded. "We're going back to the church where you originally hid the black diamond."

Angelique frowned. "Why there?"

"They're underground in that location. Isabelle and the black diamond are there."

"On sacred ground?" Mandy asked. "I thought that was impossible."

"Somehow they've managed to isolate themselves from the sanctity of the area. I sensed something different about the place, and my suspicions were confirmed when the demons attacked and took Angelique and the black diamond."

She didn't ask how he knew that. Maybe he got those insights, those feelings, just like she did. Keepers had mystical abilities of sight. Angelique didn't care, as long as Michael was correct about Isabelle's whereabouts.

But now she was worried about Father Vintaldi, who had been so nice to her. "How soon do we leave?"

"We leave immediately," Michael said. "You will stay here."

"I have to go with you."

Michael shook his head. "No. They've already taken you once. I'm not going to let it happen again." Michael looked around the room. "I need someone to volunteer to stay behind and protect Angelique."

“I’ll do it.”

Angelique couldn’t believe Ryder had been the first to offer. Immediately. Without hesitation. He loved a good demon fight. Why would he give that up to baby-sit her?

“Make sure she stays put,” Michael said. “We can’t risk the Sons of Darkness grabbing her again. If they do, it could compromise our efforts to get Isabelle.”

This was insane. “It’s important I be there. Don’t you see? I know Father Vintaldi. I know the church grounds. I’ve had contact with the black diamond.”

“You’re not going, Angelique. It’s too risky,” Lou said.

Michael stood, turned to the others. “Weapon up.”

Angelique watched, helpless, as the hunters gathered their gear and met at the door.

“We’ll keep you posted,” Michael said.

Ryder nodded, closed the front door after they left, and returned to the library.

Angelique stood and faced Ryder. “Don’t do this.”

Ryder laid his hands on her shoulders, his expression warm and tender. “I’m sorry, darlin’, but Michael’s right. You need to stay here. After what happened to you the last time at the church, it’s too dangerous for you to walk into the lion’s den.”

She shrugged him off, turned away, then back again. “You of all people know how important this is to me, how close I am to Isabelle. I need to be there.”

He didn’t answer, just closed the library doors and took a seat.

“Are you hungry?”

She shook her head.

“Tired? We could rest. You’ve been through a trauma.”

She shot him a glare. “The only trauma I’m going through is not being able to hunt for my sister and the black diamond, and kick some demon ass.”

He flopped down on the sofa. “Feisty and frustrated. Spoken like a true demon hunter. I’d like to kick their asses, too.”

She went down on her haunches in front of him. “Then let’s go. We’ll follow discreetly. They won’t even know we’re there.”

He smiled, leaned forward and took her face between his hands, and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. She felt the warmth there, the genuine caring. She wanted to sink into that comfort, to let him hold her, kiss her and erase the tension with his touch, but she couldn’t. She stiffened, pulled her lips from his, and stared expectantly at him.

“No,” Ryder said. “Much as I’d like to be out there, too, it’s not safe for you.”

She jerked out of his embrace and stood, pacing the room behind the sofa, trying to figure out how she could escape from Ryder.

He knew how much this meant to her. How could he hold her back? She’d never do this to him, would never keep him from something so important.

Bastard. He was a soldier, following orders. Her feelings meant nothing to him. She meant nothing to him. She’d just have to find a way to outsmart him.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said, his back to her.

Damn that man. “What are you, some kind of mind reader now?”

“I am where you’re concerned. Besides, if our positions were reversed, I’d be doing the same thing. Trying to figure out how to get away from you so I could join the hunters in the search.”

She stopped, crossed her arms. “Then why aren’t you helping me?”

He stalked to her, grasping her arms, his expression fierce, his tone even more so. “Because our situations *aren’t* reversed. And I don’t want the Sons of Darkness to come anywhere near you again. Ever. I don’t want to have to think about what they might be doing to you, or wonder if you’re dead or alive.”

She knew that underneath his anger was caring, anguish, and he didn’t know how to deal with it. Ryder wasn’t accustomed to having someone in his life who mattered to him.

Her anger melted away, and she reached for him, smoothing her fingers across his brow. “I’m sorry.”

He frowned. “For what?”

“I’m sorry that you care about me. I can see it hurts you.”

His lids half closed, his chin dropped to his chest as he inhaled deeply. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I’m not good at this.” He lifted his head.

“We’re both just frustrated, under pressure and wanting to do things we can’t do. We want instant results and we want things in our past to not have happened at all.” She backed away and looked out the window, realizing how much her life had changed in a few short weeks.

“I don’t want to be the daughter of a demon. I wish I hadn’t found out about it. If I could transfuse his blood out of me, I would. I hate knowing he lives inside me.”

“That isn’t who you are.” His voice was soft, reassuring.

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. Maybe she wanted, needed, condemnation. “Isn’t it? It taints me. It changes me.” Her perception of

herself, and no doubt others' perception of her.

"It only changes you in your own mind, Angie."

She looked at him over her shoulder. "What about that scene in the cottage, Ryder? I killed."

"You killed a demon. You used your powers for good."

Despite her anguish, her lips tilted. "Okay, you might have a point."

"You're one of the strongest women I've ever met, Angie. If anyone can master the demon part of you, you can. You'll be like Derek and Nic. It will just be another side of you, one you'll learn to live with, to summon when you need it. Otherwise, it won't change who you are."

She knew what he was saying. "You mean unlike you."

"It is what it is. The blood I have inside me did shape me. I never wanted to be the son of a madman abuser, someone who enjoyed his anger, who fed off hurting others. But I am. Living with him, learning from him . . . it affected me. Influenced who I became as an adult. I can't do anything about it. I learned to accept it."

"I told you, that's not who you are."

He ignored her. "It's a hell of a legacy to realize I could turn out like him, especially when I realized I had a propensity for violence."

He sat on the sofa and she went with him. "When I joined Special Ops, got into the dirty, dark assignments, I realized how much I enjoyed . . . killing."

He slanted a glance her way. "Does that shock you?"

She shook her head. "No. You were killing bad guys, weren't you?"

"Yeah, but does that really matter? I should have been unemotional about it, I should have found it distasteful. Instead, I felt a thrill every time I blew

someone away, every time I slid a knife across their throat and life drained away under my hand. It felt good.”

She laid her palm against the rough stubble of his cheek, feeling his pain, wishing she could take it away. “That doesn’t make you like your father. Because you don’t use it on the people you care about or people who don’t deserve it. And that’s the difference between you and him.”

He sat for a moment, quiet, staring at the bookshelves. She hoped what she said sank in.

“When you killed that demon at the cottage, did you enjoy it?” he asked.

She thought about it, then spoke the truth. “Yes.”

“Do you think you’re evil, Angie? Honestly?”

She shook her head. “No.” Or maybe she just hoped it.

“You’re no different after the revelation of who your father was than you were before. You don’t have that darkness within you.”

He said it with such conviction, as if he really, truly believed it to be so. “Thank you.”

She leaned in, kissed him, breathed into him, felt the muscles in his arms tense, and pulled back.

“Ryder, let it go. Let *him* go. Why is it so easy for you to believe in me, and so hard for you to believe in yourself?”

He let out a husky laugh. “I don’t know.”

“I believe in you. And I could never love someone who was like him.”

He looked at her. Really stared at her, like he couldn’t believe she’d said the words.

She couldn't believe she'd said them either, but now that she had, the need to tell him everything bubbled up inside her.

"We're so much alike," she continued. "Strong, stubborn, able to survive out there on our own. I knew when we first met that we were similar spirits. We've been solitary for so long that I think it's taken both of us our entire lives to learn to lean on someone else."

She inhaled, aware she might be the only one who felt this way, but needing to tell him.

"I've never loved anyone other than my mother and my sister. I've had men in my life, but they never mattered to me. But you and me, we have a connection. We share something together that I find amazing. When I'm with you, I'm at peace, in body and heart. I've never had that before. No one with the violence inside them that you think you carry around could make me feel that way.

"I need you, Ryder. And I've never needed anyone before. I love you."

She didn't wait for him to speak, just crawled into his lap, wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Angelique's words played over and over in Ryder's head. He'd started this to try to make her feel better, to show her the difference between him and her. Instead, she'd blown him away, accepting him for who he was, convincing him that he wasn't his father and could never be, and then telling him that she loved him.

She loved him. What the hell had he done to deserve such an honor? He wasn't an honorable man.

Ah, hell. Her soft lips slid like warm, silken butter over his, melting the last of the tension away. He gave up on thinking when the tip of her tongue slid through his teeth, jolting him into full sexual heat. With a sharp groan, he gave up and jerked her fully against him, wrapping his arms around her so he could feel her body—really feel her body.

Within seconds he was hard, his cock pushing against his pants with the rush of heat and desire that seemed to occur so damn fast whenever Angie was near. From the first time he'd become aware of her in the caves in Australia, when she'd thrown that first teasing remark his way and he'd responded by storming over to her and pulling her into his arms for a kiss, he'd known there was something about her that was different from other women.

She was right. There was a bond between them. He sure as hell felt it now. Like sparks of electricity that zinged through his nerve endings, firing him to life, concentrating all his thought processes on just her—on getting her clothes off so he could touch the soft silk of her body, kiss her all over. They were alone now. He didn't need to hurry. He could take his time and really love her.

Really love her. Yeah, he did, didn't he?

He stood, lifting Angie into his arms. She broke the kiss, looked at him, her gaze warm and melting all over him with heat and understanding.

It seemed to take forever to get upstairs and to his room. He could have taken her in the library again, but this time he wanted to be assured of privacy, so he could take his time.

He kicked the door closed and laid her on his bed. Yeah, he liked seeing her there, knowing that's where she belonged, where she'd stay from now on.

She was his. A rush of possessiveness hit him like a mortar blast. He waited for the inevitable twinge of discomfort, the need to run that always happened when he started to get too close.

It didn't happen. He liked having her here in his room. This is where he wanted her to stay.

She leaned up on her elbows, arched a brow, and watched him. She'd never looked sexier, one slender leg raised, her bare foot planted on the mattress. A natural, unaffected pose. And when she smiled at him—a smile of confidence in what was about to happen, but also mixed with a touch of vulnerability—man, that was hot. He knew how she felt. Yeah, they both knew they were going to get down to it, but they both had feelings bubbling up to the surface. They could both get hurt. But they were still going to put themselves out there.

He liked knowing they were even. It made him want to show her that she didn't have anything to be afraid of. Not with him, anyway.

He'd never been one to take time with a woman, to explore every inch of her body, to really pleasure her. It was always about getting to the sweet spot, getting them both off, then hightailing it the hell out of there before anything emotional happened. But now, with Angelique, he had all this damn . . . emotion. It was physical, for sure; but there was much more than that, and he wasn't sure he knew what to do with all of it.

Other than he really wanted to take it slow.

He crawled onto the end of the bed and kissed the top of her foot.

“That tickles,” she said.

“Does it?” He did it again, this time kissing his way up to her ankle and onto her calf, reaching out to hold her leg in place when she laughed. The deep, gravelly sound of her laugh sent shock waves of pleasure through his body.

“What are you doing?”

“Kissing you.”

“Oh.”

He loved the feel of her skin against his lips. Even her knee. And he loved even more the way she responded, lying back and just . . . breathing. Deeply. As if she was really affected by his lips on her kneecap. That made him smile.

She let out a little whispered gasp when he moved upward, pressing his lips close to her inner thigh.

“Ryder.”

“Yeah, darlin’,” he murmured against her skin.

“I love your mouth.”

He loved the sound of her voice. “Keep talking to me.” He reached for the waistband of her shorts and tugged them over her hips, drawing them down her legs and out of his way. “Now these are pretty.”

Tiny black panties, part lace, part satin, skimming just her hipbones and barely covering her sex. Naughty little things, just like the woman wearing them.

She tilted her head up, watching him as he pressed his hand over her pubic bone.

“I . . . I like underwear. It makes me feel feminine even when I’m working a dusty, dirty archaeological dig. Sometimes it’s . . . months before I can dress up and I . . . oh, God.”

He grinned, knowing she’d lost her ability to speak when he slid his fingers under the silky material to caress the moist, swollen cleft of her sex. Her head dropped to the mattress and she lifted against his hand.

“That’s it. Tell me what you want.”

“More.”

He gave her more, caressing her, dipping his fingers inside her. Damn. She clenched tight around him, grabbing his fingers with a warm, welcoming grip. His cock tightened and he wanted to be deep inside her. Right now.

But he was going to thoroughly pleasure her from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, which meant his own needs would have to wait. Which wasn’t difficult considering how she was squirming underneath him. Her reactions ratcheted up his own desire to please her. So he rolled to the side of her, placed a soft kiss on her hip, and just watched her face as he dragged his thumb over her center.

She turned her head, her eyes open and focused on his face.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes.”

“There?”

“Oh, yes.”

He’d never been this intimate with a woman before—never looked into her eyes as he brought her to the edge, or asked her how something felt. Hell, if he were honest with himself, he’d never cared before. Yeah, he got a woman there—he at least gave it that much effort—but before it had been about the pure physical satisfaction of sex.

Now he wanted Angie to feel this—really feel this. To know that it was *him* giving her this pleasure. And the selfish part of him wanted it to be better for her than it had ever been with any other man.

The room was filled with the sounds and scent of her, the heady aroma of her desire, the feel of her undulating beneath his questing hand and fingers. It was a unique experience, and he was drunk with the pleasure of it. All he wanted to do was touch her, taste her, and make her fully his.

But first, he wanted to make her come.

He slid his thumb over the swollen nub at her center, using soft, coaxing movements to draw her closer to the edge. When she tensed, then cried out, he held her, watching her face as she climaxed.

“Ryder.” His name left her lips in a long, slow shudder. She kept her eyes open, her gaze directed at him. She gave it all to him and he’d never seen anything more beautiful than his woman coming apart for him.

He’d never felt closer to a woman before. But he wanted even more. When her trembling died down, he drew her panties off, then spread her legs, mesmerized by her utter softness, the way she glistened as she opened up to him. He drew her tank top up, dragging it over her ribs, then her breasts, revealing a matching black lacy bra. He unhooked the clasp in the center and freed her breasts.

“You’re staring.”

He slid his gaze to her face, then quirked his lips. “Yeah. You’re beautiful.”

A pink blush stained her cheeks and chest. “Thank you. So are you.” She held out her arms to him, but he took her wrists and placed them at her sides.

“Let me.”

She let out a soft, rippling sigh.

Resuming his visual feast, he focused on the plump peaches of her breasts, centered by ripe, pink nipples. They were hard, tight points peaking upward toward his waiting mouth.

Did she have any idea what just the sight of her did to him? He was tied up in knots, aching to be a part of her.

“Ryder.”

“Yeah.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“I’m just lookin’ at you, babe.”

“I can see that. You know, one of the things I love most about you is your intensity, the way you throw yourself into everything you do with full force.”

He shook his head. “Not this time.” Dammit, couldn’t she see how much he was trying to hold back for her?

“Just love me.”

He sat back on his heels, cocked his head to the side, and said, “I do love you.”

He’d never seen a more serene smile. Her eyes glistened with tears. She tilted up, reached for his face, and pulled him down on top of her. “I love you, too. Now *make* love to me. Hard. Passionately. Be yourself and give me all of you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He didn’t have to be told twice.

Suddenly his clothes were a hindrance. He had to pull away from her long enough to get rid of them, while she removed her tank top and bra. When they were both naked, skin to skin, he slid on top of her, savoring the feel of the length of his body along hers. But he couldn’t appreciate it for long,

because the driving need to be inside her had taken over, and with one push he seated himself fully, feeling her pulse and tighten around him.

He shuddered in his next breath as he drove in harder, deeper, wanting to push himself fully inside her. She surrounded him with wet heat, her hands moving skillfully over his back with soft, gentle movements.

She was killing him from the inside out, looking up at him with liquid pools of green and gold eyes, completely open to him. He dug his fingers into her hair and pulled her face to his, kissing her as deeply as he moved within her.

It was like a fierce battle, an internal war waged with the dark side of him and this newly found emotional side that was new and raw. One he hadn't yet come to grips with. Part of him wanted to hold back, to do what he normally did and just go for the physical. The other side of him dove into Angie with everything he had, merging with the old Ryder. It only served to intensify his passion.

He was losing his mind, his grip on sanity, and at the core of everything he used to be and all he was about to become was Angelique. She drove him, writhing underneath him, both sweet and yet demanding him to give her all that he had.

And he was scared to death he was going to hurt her.

"Don't stop," she breathed against his mouth, taking his bottom lip between her teeth and tugging even as she raised her hips to take more of him. "Please, don't stop."

She knew. Somehow, she sensed his hesitation, this conflict of darkness and light within him, and she realized he wanted to back away from the animal need spiraling up and threatening to rear its ugly head and tear her apart.

But he couldn't stop it now. She'd given him the green light and he was going to go for it. He grabbed hold of her hair with one hand, jerking her head back so the creamy column of her throat was open to him. He licked his way along her neck, feeling her shudder underneath him, feeling her

walls clench around his cock, which only served to drive him even more into the darkness.

He slid the other hand underneath her, gripping her buttocks and drawing her closer so he could rock inside her, against her. She splintered, crying out as she climaxed, her body trembling, racking with spasms both inside and out.

Now he couldn't hold back. He dug his fingers into her and buried his face in her neck as he came apart, pouring himself into her, growling out her name against her skin.

Sweating, it seemed hours before oblivion became reality again, though he was sure it was only a few minutes. Angelique lay limp underneath him, her own breathing erratic.

He lifted his head to scan her face. She looked at him and her lips curled.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah." She swept his hair off his forehead.

He rolled to the side and pulled her with him so they faced each other. "You do strange things to me."

"Strange good or strange bad?"

"A little of both, I think. I don't know what I'm doing when I'm in bed with you."

She arched a brow. "Seemed to me you knew exactly what you were doing."

He laughed. "Not what I meant. I just . . . lose it with you."

Her soft little hum made his dick quiver. "That's not a bad thing. I like you losing it. I like losing it with you. I've never abandoned myself so freely with anyone before you."

“Good to know.”

She pressed her lips to his. “It’s not a crime to lose control, Ryder.”

“I’m just not used to it.”

“I understand. You still worry about who you are, what you might do.”

He didn’t answer. But she was right.

“You’ll never hurt me. I’ve known that for as long as I’ve known you.”

“How did you know that?”

She shrugged. “Instinct. A woman knows who to be wary of.”

“Didn’t work so well for your mother.” He bit back an oath as soon as he’d said it, wishing he wasn’t such an insensitive bastard. Then again, he was who he was and Angie would have to learn to deal with that if she was going to be with him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m an ass.”

A shadow crossed her face, and she nodded. “Yes, you are. But you always say what’s on your mind, and I love that about you. Don’t worry about hurting my feelings. I want to know what you’re thinking.” She smiled again. “Besides, I’m not my mother. And you’re not a demon in disguise.”

If only he could be sure of that. “Oh, I don’t know. I’ve carried plenty of demons inside me over the years.”

She laid her palm on his cheek. “It’s not the same thing. I know you, inside and out. I know what you’re capable of. Yes, you have violence in your past, and it’s part of who you are. But you’ll never hurt me. Not the way your father hurt your mother, the way he hurt you.”

He took her palm and kissed it. “I love you.”

She breathed deeply, then her face went serious. “Then take me to my sister.”

“I can’t. It’s not safe for you.”

“So everyone keeps telling me.” She pushed away from him and sat up. “Don’t you understand that I can help her? I can find her. I can find the black diamond. I might be the only one who can. I’ll bet you and I are the only ones.”

Curious, Ryder propped himself up on one elbow. “Why do you say that?”

“Can’t you sense it?”

“Sense what?”

“The black diamond. It’s like we’re a part of it.”

He’d been so busy dealing with Angie, he wasn’t sensing anything. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

She crossed her legs and faced him, taking his hands in hers. “Tap into your feelings. You touched the black diamond back at the caves in Australia, just like I did. It somehow . . . links us to it. I know it does. We have a connection with it. As soon as it came back to life, I felt it.”

“Sorry, darlin’, but I’ve got nothing.”

“You’re not trying hard enough. Think about the black diamond. Visualize it. I know you can feel it, just like I can.”

She pulled at his hands until he sat up and faced her. “Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

“Focus on how it felt when you touched it back at the caves. Remember how alive it was?”

He did remember that. “It glowed. Almost like it had a living pulse inside it.”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes! That’s it exactly. And now the diamond is alive again. And it’s calling to us.”

Ryder thought about the diamond, tried to visualize its whereabouts, tried to connect with it, and came up empty. He shook his head. “Sorry, babe, I’ve got nothing but a void here.”

“Dammit. *I* can feel it. Why can’t you?”

He knew why. “You’re half demon, Angie. You’re connected to the Sons of Darkness, and so is the black diamond. That’s why you’re getting signals from it.”

She blinked, then nodded. “That would make sense.”

He studied her expression, looking for signs of upset. But she only seemed to be analyzing. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine. I’m just trying to figure this out. So maybe I am of use to the Sons of Darkness after all.”

“Which is what I’ve been trying to tell you. That’s why you couldn’t go on the expedition to find your sister. The Sons of Darkness want you back.”

“Which is why we *should* go there. It’ll give them something to concentrate on other than the hunters. They’ll want me, they want to keep Isabelle, they want to protect the black diamond. Trying to get to me, keep her, and protect the diamond forces them to divvy up their concentration so they can’t focus on one thing alone.”

What she said made sense. It was logical. And it was damn hard to argue with logic.

“Besides, I can find Izzy.”

“How?”

“I have a connection to my sister, one I’ve never felt as strongly as I did when I was stuck in that room. It was like the instant she put her hands on

the black diamond, I knew it.”

He saw the stress in her face, the worry.

“She’s gone dark, Ryder.” She laid her hand on her stomach. “It sickens me to feel the evil swirling around inside her. I have to help her.”

“Damn,” Ryder said, lowering his head.

“It’s not your fault. I knew this would happen. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have run with the black diamond back in Australia. I screwed it up from the very beginning. I thought I was protecting her, and all I did was put her in a position to be taken, and the diamond along with her.”

“It’s no one’s fault,” Ryder said. “Placing blame isn’t going to get her back. And nothing is set in stone. You’ve taught me that. Everything can be changed.”

She smiled at him. “True enough.”

“So first we have to find her and the black diamond, and ensure its destruction.”

“I can find Izzy. I’m . . . hooked into her right now, experiencing these weird sensations attributed to her. But I know it’s her, and I know I can find her.”

Ryder knew he was going to get his ass skewered over this, but sometimes the right decision wasn’t always . . . the right choice.

“Get dressed. Let’s move.”

She leaped across the bed and threw her arms around his neck, planting a long kiss on his lips. When she pulled back, she said, “Thank you for believing in me.”

She had believed in him when he hadn’t believed in himself. He owed her. “You’ve got ten minutes.”

She leaped off the bed and threw open the door, her feet pounding down the hall. “I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

They had set up inside the church, the safest place until they figured out where they were going, since Lou ascertained there would be no way the demons would step inside the sanctity of the church itself. For some reason, either the grounds weren't considered holy or the demons had managed to make that area their own, but the church itself ? There were several ancient holy artifacts in there, so the demons weren't going to go inside. They'd never last long enough to launch a decent attack inside.

After Michael explained the situation, an appalled Father Vintaldi told the hunters the entire grounds were theirs. They could dig everything up except the cemetery if they wanted to, he'd told them.

Dalton felt bad for the old priest. Father Vintaldi said he felt responsible for the demons taking Angelique. Like he should have known they were there, that the demons would take her.

Dalton knew the feeling. He of all people should have seen this coming, should have kept closer watch over Isabelle, especially. That had been his duty. He'd been responsible for her, and he'd failed.

He knew what had gone wrong. He'd let his attraction to Isabelle mesmerize him. He'd forgotten what he was supposed to do. He'd lost sight of the objective and he'd let emotion cloud his judgment. And because of that, the Sons of Darkness had taken her.

He should have stayed behind with Isabelle at the chapel that day. The Realm staff weren't hunters. There was no way they could have determined what was going on with Isabelle. They didn't know her history. If he'd been in the chapel with her, he'd have known. Instead, he'd let guilt send him away from her when he should have been at her side guarding her.

He knew all about the lure of temptation, how easy it was to slip into darkness. They seduced her while she was weak and helpless, and she'd fallen.

He could have stopped her. He had the strength and power to do it.

There were things he knew, something he was, that even Lou didn't know. There were some things he couldn't talk about with anyone. That's just the way it was and always had been, and he'd lived with his secrets for a long time. But it didn't mean he couldn't have used his knowledge to prevent the train wreck that had occurred.

He hadn't used his head, because he'd been blinded by his dick. And guilt.

Really stupid move. No wonder he'd stayed celibate for so damn long. It had kept his focus on demon hunting, where it should have been. At least until he'd met Isabelle. Then he'd let his libido run wild.

That wasn't going to happen again.

He was going to get her back. The Sons of Darkness weren't going to have her, weren't going to be allowed to assimilate her into their den of shadows and evil. Isabelle had too much light inside her.

She belongs with you.

He shook off the thought as soon as it entered his mind.

She didn't belong with him. No one belonged with him. That was the mistake he'd made, and he wouldn't make it again. He'd do whatever it took to right that error.

The sooner the better.

They were set up in a small room off the main chapel. Lou had his laptop open and was scanning the area for hot spots, places where demons could pop up from underground.

“Anything yet?” he asked Lou, needing to put his mind front and center on the mission.

Lou didn’t bother looking up from his laptop. “Not yet. Quiet and cold. Nothing’s coming up on the image scans.”

“We should have brought Angelique with us.”

Michael looked up from his perusal of Lou’s laptop. “Are you serious? That would have been a bad idea.”

“Actually, I agree with Dalton,” Mandy said. “Angelique wanted to be used as bait, and if anything would bring the Sons of Darkness out of hiding, it would be her. It’s not like we wouldn’t be on guard this time. We’d have been able to protect her.”

“Exactly,” Dalton said. “Fighting them on our turf is much easier than going down to them. We want them up here.”

“Dalton has a point,” Lou said to Michael.

Michael leaned back in the chair. “I don’t like risking someone else’s life just to make the Realm’s job easier.” He glared at the group of them assembled near the stained glass windows. “Aren’t you all tough enough to handle it?”

Dalton narrowed his gaze. “Are you being purposely insulting, or are you just trying to challenge us so we’ll head underground to get the black diamond and Isabelle?”

“We can do the job wherever it is,” Punk said, his tone low and menacing.

“You don’t really know anything about us, do you, Michael?” Mandy asked, shaking her head.

“No, I don’t,” he replied. “I’m just trying to figure out why you’re all so eager to throw an innocent woman to the wolves in order to make your own jobs easier.”

“It’s called strategy,” Trace said.

Even Derek seemed angry. “What do your people do? Pick one way—the hardest way in—and go with that so you can show off your skills? Don’t you consider options?”

A shadow crossed Michael’s eyes at Derek’s words. Dalton didn’t give a shit what had happened to Michael’s team. That was his guilt to live with. He didn’t care to have his own team insulted.

“That’s enough,” Lou said quietly.

Michael held up his hand. “It’s okay. My team always considered options. But sometimes the going-in-gunsblazing-to-hell-with-the-consequences isn’t the best way. Sometimes, that’s how people get killed. We’re demon hunters. We’re trained to do this. Someone like Angelique isn’t.”

“So you ignore the best approach?” Mandy countered.

“No. I always consider every alternative.”

“Then why didn’t you consider me? I was your best option.”

Dalton whipped his head around at the sound of Angelique’s voice. Ryder stood next to her, a grin on his face and a weapon cradled in his arm.

“You were supposed to stay at the castle. With Angelique,” Michael said, frowning.

“Angelique can be very persuasive. She convinced me that her being here is the best way to draw out the Sons of Darkness, so we can rescue her sister and retake the black diamond.”

Dalton smirked. Ryder must be a freakin’ mind reader.

“We were just discussing that option, as a matter of fact,” Mandy said, sauntering over to Angelique and draping her arm over her shoulder. “Are you sure?”

Angelique nodded. “I was sure the first time. I’m doubly certain now.”

Ryder shouldered his laser and stepped fully into the room. “Angie seems to have some kind of connection to the black diamond, and to her sister.”

“What kind of connection?” Dalton asked.

“I can’t really explain it,” she said. “But when I was trapped in that room, I knew the moment the black diamond came to life. It was when Isabelle put her hands on it. And when it sparked up, so did I.”

“Because you touched it in the caves,” Lou offered.

She shrugged. “At first, that’s what I thought. But Ryder laid his hands on it, too, and he said he doesn’t feel a thing.”

“Ryder doesn’t have demon blood. You do. It’s not surprising that it forged a bond with you.”

Angelique pulled up a chair next to Lou. “But it stopped glowing when I touched it. Bart pushed me away, as if I couldn’t make the black diamond do . . . whatever it was he needed it to do.”

Ryder placed his hands on Angelique’s shoulders. She tilted her head back toward him and smiled. Clearly the two of them had developed a relationship.

Dalton was glad. At least it seemed to be working out for some of his friends. He’d seen it happen for Derek and Gina, for Nic and Shay, and now apparently for Ryder and Angelique. But it would never be for him.

Lou pushed his chair back from the table and leaned toward Angelique. “You have a demon Lord’s blood within you, Angelique. But for some reason your sister possesses the darkness they’re looking for.”

Angelique inhaled, then blew it out. “I know she does. I feel that, too. I’m afraid that as soon as she laid her hands on the black diamond, she succumbed to the darkness within her.”

So not what Dalton wanted to hear, but what he feared had happened. “How bad is it?”

Angelique looked at him. “I don’t know yet. I need to see her.”

“If she’s moved over to the side of the Sons of Darkness—completely over to their side . . .”

Michael trailed off, but Dalton knew what he meant. If Isabelle had gone evil, she was a threat to the Realm. She’d need to be eliminated.

“What?” Angelique asked. “Tell me.”

Ryder grasped her hand. “What Michael’s saying is that if she’s a demon, wholly demon, the Realm of Light will destroy her.”

She shuddered a breath, her wary gaze scanning the room. “You all will kill my sister.”

No one nodded, but they didn’t have to. They’d do what they had vowed to do to any demon. Dalton knew how hard this was for her. He didn’t want to think about it, either; he refused to contemplate the possibility.

“You didn’t kill Derek or Nic, and they are half-blood demons,” she argued.

“Angelique, we don’t yet know what’s happened to Isabelle,” Lou said. “Let’s hope she’s just like Derek and Nic, that she’s able to control the demon within her, just as you seem to be able to do.”

“Because if I can’t, you’ll destroy me, too.”

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary,” Lou countered with a faint smile. “You’ve exhibited no signs of allowing the demon blood in you to take over.”

“And neither will my sister.”

Dalton hoped that was the case. He didn’t want Isabelle to die. They didn’t know her like he did.

“We’re glad you came,” Mandy said, breaking the tension that surrounded them.

“You put your ass on the line to do it. Now that you’re here the Sons of Darkness are going to be gunning for you. That shows guts.” Derek nodded his appreciation of Angelique’s courage.

“I don’t know if it’s guts or just utter terror for my sister. I have to find her. She’s the only family I have left. Sitting at the castle unable to take part in this felt wrong. Not when I could be the catalyst to bring them out of hiding.”

Michael sighed. “Okay, now that you’re here and evidently insisting on staying, we’ll see what happens.”

Angelique exhaled in relief, glad she was going to be allowed to remain.

“Thank you. I know you were trying your best to keep me safe, and I appreciate it. But I think this is the best approach.” Especially knowing what could possibly happen to Izzy. She’d do anything to prevent it—if it wasn’t already too late.

“Your presence here will get the Sons of Darkness’ attention,” Lou said. “If they want you back, and we assume they do, then they should make their presence known more easily. And when they do, we can dispatch them and find our way to their hiding place.”

“And you think that’s where my sister is? Underground somewhere?”

“Possibly,” Michael said. “We know for a fact she’s here. As is the black diamond. Whether they’re underground or not is uncertain.”

Ryder pulled up a chair and sat next to Angelique.

“Now what?” she asked.

“We wait. See what happens.”

“This is interesting.”

Angelique looked up at Lou. He was poring over papers on the table. “What?”

“There’s an older part of the cemetery, closed and no longer in use.”

She and Ryder stood and moved over to the table. Angelique scanned the document. “This looks like an ancient blueprint.”

“Yes,” Lou said. “I was trying to plot out perimeter strategy, minus the cemetery, figuring those wouldn’t be utilized by the demons along with the church proper. But this part here I’m curious about.”

“I’ll go get Father Vintaldi,” Gina said, leaving the room.

“Something about the area bothering you, Lou?” Mandy asked.

“Yes. I feel a strong pull to that location.”

“But if it’s part of the cemetery, the demons wouldn’t use it, would they?” Dalton asked.

“I wouldn’t think so, unless the ground there hasn’t been consecrated.”

Gina returned with Father Vintaldi in tow.

“Is there something I can assist you with?” the priest asked.

“Father, we need to know about this area.” Lou pointed to the blueprints.

Father Vintaldi leaned over the table and studied them, then nodded. “Ah, yes, the old burial ground.”

“So it is holy ground.”

Father Vintaldi shook his head. “It is ancient ground, centuries old. The bodies once buried there were relocated to the new cemetery when the first church was built on this land in the 1700s.”

“Then there aren’t any bodies in that area.” Dalton looked down at the blueprint, then at Lou. “They might be there.”

Lou nodded. “It’s possible. And I do have a very strong feeling about the place.”

“It has lain untouched for a long time.” Father Vintaldi frowned. “Something about that place is evil. No one likes to go in there.”

“Evil? *Padre*, what do you mean?” Angelique asked.

“It is said that only the criminals were buried there. Without benefit of holy blessings. Vile, evil men who had been executed, as well as those who had been suspected of practicing the dark arts. They were buried without forgiveness.”

Angelique looked at Ryder. Without forgiveness. She knew what that meant.

“Of course, we eventually moved their remains to the new cemetery and provided them their absolution when we reburied them.”

“But the old burial ground had no consecrated graves, did it?” she asked.

Father Vintaldi shook his head. “No, it did not, I’m sorry to say.”

“What’s left in that area now, Father?” Michael asked.

“Just the empty graveyard and the old stone building that was once used as a holding place for the criminals. And for the executions.”

“Please, go on,” Michael said.

The priest nodded. “It is rumored the dark arts were practiced there, too. Rituals, worships of the devil, things that were forbidden.” Father Vintaldi crossed himself.

“That could be where they are,” Ryder said.

Lou nodded. “We need to get ready to go.”

“Time to weapon up.” Dalton turned and walked away, already heading for his laser.

As the hunters strapped on their holsters and loaded their weapons, Angelique felt a rush of adrenaline. She moved to Ryder’s side.

“You’re not leaving me here.” She didn’t care if she had to take them all on one by one. She wasn’t going to be left behind again. Too much was at stake.

His head shot up and he looked at her for a few seconds, then his lips curled in a knowing smile. “Not this time. Never again.” He lifted an extra holster out of his bag, along with a stash of weapons that he laid out on the table. “I hope you can shoot straight, darlin’, because you’re about to become a demon hunter.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A few months ago, Ryder would have resented having Angie along on this hunt. Untrained, she would have been a hindrance to the team.

Now he was glad she walked by his side. He believed in her and her ability to handle anything that came up.

He scanned the area around them, since they were bringing up the rear. All darkness, trees, and bushes as they made their way along the path. Nothing going on—yet. But it was coming soon.

Angelique and Mandy were two steps ahead of him.

Ryder lay back and let Angelique and Mandy walk side by side, talking. Mandy was so damn tall she towered over Angie, yet they laughed together, Mandy pushing into Angie and Angie shoving back like a couple kids out playing. Despite the incongruity in their sizes, their heads were bent together, whispering. Angelique would look back at him, back at Mandy and they'd whisper again, then burst into silent giggles. Like teenagers.

He knew she was talking to Mandy about him, and he didn't care. He liked seeing her relaxed, even though it could only be for a few moments. Bad shit was about to happen, and she knew it. She was blowing off some steam before the big event, trying to pretend it didn't exist. That was okay. He'd done the same thing before a skirmish. Sometimes it was necessary to let it go, not get too wound up and let the tension build, otherwise you'd lose focus and be ready to explode when the big bad came.

Smart girl.

Angie's battle was just about to begin. But she had him at her side, and he wasn't about to let her go.

She'd win the battle, too. No matter what.

Angie stopped suddenly.

"We're halting back here," Ryder commed to Michael up front.

"Okay," Michael commed back.

Ryder moved up to Angie's side. "What's wrong?"

"I can feel my sister." She looked ahead, then to the left, pointing. "There. See the light?"

Ryder squinted, then spotted the building. "Northeast, Michael. There's a small light and a structure," Ryder said into the comm.

"Got it. We're moving forward."

"Are you getting any sense of what's going on in there?" Ryder asked her.

"She's surrounded by demons," Angelique said. "But she's not afraid. They're protecting her. And the black diamond. Izzy and the black diamond are in the building."

"Can you give us a demon count?" Michael asked.

Angelique went silent for a few seconds. "I can't see them all, just the ones near Isabelle. There's a cluster around her, that's all I can tell you."

"Location within the building?"

Again, she went quiet as they continued to walk, as if she were trying to dig deep into what she saw. "The building is two stories with a room underground. She's in the underground room, I think. It's very dark down there."

"Is the black diamond in the same location?"

"Yes. Right with her."

“That’ll make it easier,” Michael said. “We’ll go in the first floor and head straight to the basement as a team. I want to get Isabelle and the black diamond out of there as fast as we can.”

“What about sweeping the other floors and taking out the demons?” Punk asked.

“At this point, our primary objective is Isabelle and the black diamond. Take out the demons we need to, but other than that we need to protect Isabelle and grab the black diamond. Nothing more.”

Punk growled. Ryder knew the feeling. Killing demons was their objective, but he understood what Michael was saying.

The building loomed before them, so black it nearly blended with the darkness of their surroundings. Two stories, the same architectural style as the old church, yet not as remarkable. It wasn’t very big, which would make it easier if they had to search the entire thing. But what was underground? Demons could come up from under the earth, so who knew how many were down there.

“Get ready,” Michael said as they approached the front door.

“You stay right by my side at all times,” Ryder said to Angie. “Don’t leave me for a second. I need to concentrate on killing demons and getting to your sister. If you get impatient and go running off to rescue Isabelle by yourself, then I’ll have to worry about what you’re doing and I can’t do my job.”

She nodded and rested her hand on his forearm. “I understand. Ryder, I’ll be fine. I promise.”

He was still going to worry about her. The Sons of Darkness were unpredictable, and there were a thousand ways things could go wrong. No matter what the objective was, Angie was coming out of there alive. *That* was his primary objective.

“Everyone ready?” Michael asked.

When Michael received all the affirmatives, they moved out from the cover of trees and to the front of the building.

“Ten bucks says the front door is unlocked,” Punk said.

“You’re on,” Trace shot back.

They crowded around the door and Punk turned the knob. He cast a smug smile over his shoulder and, with his palm, pushed the door open into pure darkness.

“Shit,” Trace whispered.

The hunters surrounded Angelique. They moved as a tight group into the entryway. The musty smell from lack of use permeated the air around them, so thick in their nostrils you could almost see it.

It smelled like death in here. But was it old death—or new? Ryder moved closer to Angie.

“I’m okay,” she whispered, though he knew she had to be worried.

They moved as a unit, their only objective to find the door that led to the lower floor. The main level was deserted, not a sound heard other than their booted footsteps on the dusty stone floor. There weren’t even footprints marring the thick layer of dirt and dust on the floor. It seemed untouched and completely unoccupied, which meant that no demons had even been up here.

“This way,” Michael said. “I see a door.”

He opened the door, then turned to them and nodded. “Stairs leading down. Be ready.”

They walked, single file, down the broken cement stairs. Angie held Ryder’s hand as he negotiated the hazardous steps in front of her. As soon as they reached the bottom, she squeezed his hand. He stopped and turned to her.

“What’s wrong?”

She pressed a hand to her stomach. “I feel Isabelle. She’s really close.”

“Can you tell anything about her state of mind?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s . . . clouded now, like she’s aware I’ve made some kind of connection with her and she’s trying to block me out.”

“That’s strange.” And not good. If what he suspected was going on, this wasn’t going to end well. He needed to get with Lou and Michael before all this went down.

“That way,” Angie said, pointing down a narrow hallway.

“Ryder, you lead with Angelique’s direction,” Michael instructed. “We’re right behind you.”

Ryder stepped to the front and pulled Angie behind him. “Okay, Angie. Where to?”

“Straight. The hallway will narrow. Then I see dirt and darkness and a large room.”

Ryder moved them slowly down the pitch black hallway. It was so narrow his shoulders brushed the sides. How could a hulking hybrid demon get through here?

They couldn’t. That’s why they didn’t find any upstairs. But the lean purebreds could have been up there.

Then again, maybe all the demons were protecting Isabelle and the black diamond, so it was unnecessary to occupy the house. Either way, he could already sense the danger, could smell the putrid, rotting odor of hybrids.

“You smell that?” he combed.

“Yeah,” Punk growled. “Hybrids.”

At least they knew one form of enemy they'd have to face.

The hallway was short, and as Angie said, it led to a small room that was nothing but thick rock walls from floor to ceiling. The room was rectangular and reeked of death.

"Looks man-made," Ryder said as they stepped fully into the room.

"My guess is that this was some form of execution room," Michael said. "There are gouges and holes in the walls, possibly where there used to be something holding chains or a way to bind prisoners."

Ryder grimaced and moved closer to Angie. Just in brushing his shoulder against hers he realized she was chilled.

"You okay?"

She gave him a quick nod. "Let's find Izzy and get her out of this hellhole."

Just then, Ryder heard a growl, caught the putrid odor of hybrids; in this small room, with only the narrow hallway as escape, the hunters were in deep shit.

"They're coming," he warned.

"We're ready for them." Punk raised his weapon.

"There are no doors," Angelique whispered, grimacing at the smell. "Where are they coming from?"

Ryder didn't need to answer her, because a door just . . . appeared in the previously solid wall, and through it walked demons.

Lots of them. Hybrids. Thick, hideous creatures with wide foreheads, vacant eyes, fangs, and claws. The stuff of every kid's nightmares. A creature with no mercy . . . no soul. No matter how many times they faced the hybrids, Ryder hated it. He wished they could obliterate all of them. They had been bred to cause fear. The Sons of Darkness had succeeded.

This was what he fought for—to make sure these fuckers could never hurt humans.

Ryder raised his laser and started firing at the first group that ambled through the doorway. But they'd no sooner hit one group, who started to gelatinize, then another group would come through.

Instinctively, the hunters set up in a straight line and barraged the demons with round after round of laser fire, never once letting the hybrids advance close enough to take them on. Soon the room was filled with smoke and the fetid odor of melting flesh. They were making headway, and Ryder and the others began to advance.

Even mindless hybrids apparently had a need for selfpreservation, because they hesitated, retreating from the constant stream of laser fire.

“Move!” Derek hollered. “Before that doorway disappears.”

The hybrids backed away, and the hunters rushed in their direction, getting through the doorway and pushing the demons back with the force of their weaponry. Ryder heard a whooshing sound behind him, figuring that was the wall closing, but couldn't worry about it. All the hunters were inside, and they were beating back the hybrids with the lasers. Which was the only thing that mattered.

He sidled a quick glance toward Angie, saw her concentrated expression as she repeatedly took aim and fired on one hybrid after another, never once stopping when one fell before she set her sights on another and blasted it.

That's my girl. She was a quick learner.

The smoke from the laser fire and melting demons grew so thick it was getting hard to see. It was still dark wherever they were, so that made it even more difficult.

But finally, it became apparent that demons had stopped coming at them.

“Cease fire,” Ryder commanded.

They waited, weapons still at the ready, until the smoke cleared enough to survey the situation. Demon carcasses lay all around them, but Ryder couldn't see any live ones.

"Hybrids seem to have disappeared," Punk said with a satisfied nod. "We kicked their asses."

"Great. Now where the fuck are we?" Trace asked.

"Good question," Ryder replied. "Because we aren't inside anymore." He smelled dirt, and trees, and even beyond the smoke, the freshness of air. Outside air.

"Another of the Sons of Darkness' magic tricks?" Mandy asked. "Like what they did with the caves in Australia?"

"Hell if I know," Ryder asked, turning to Angie.

But she was already moving through the smoke, disappearing into the thick mist.

And if it was mist, not smoke, then Ryder needed to stop her, before she walked into the midst of materializing demons. They didn't even know where they were yet.

"Angie."

She didn't stop.

He grabbed her arm. "Slow down, darlin'. Where are you going?"

It took her a few seconds to drag her gaze away from the thick smoke ahead. Her eyes were unfocused as she looked at him, then back at the mist.

"Angie, what's wrong?"

"Isabelle is on the other side. So is the black diamond. It's calling to me. I . . . I need to go, right now."

She turned to walk away, but Ryder kept firm hold of her arm.

“Wait. You said the black diamond is calling to you?”

She frowned. “No. I said I feel Isabelle. She’s reaching out to me in some way. I need to go to her.”

That was not what she’d said. She tried to pull away, but he held firm.

“Hang on. Let’s stop, plan this out.”

She looked down where he had a grip on her upper arm, then back up at him. “No. We’ve planned enough. It’s time to go, Ryder. No more waiting.”

Tension rocketed up her arm, her muscles stiffening when he refused to yield.

“Ryder. Let me go.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’. I can’t do that.” He intended to hold her, to figure out what she’d just said, what was going on with her. Something wasn’t right.

That is, until she turned on him, her eyes gone bloodred. With triple her usual strength, she jerked her arm from his hold, and in a voice that could only be described as deep and demonic, she grasped his forearm in a crushing grip. “No. It’s time for you to let me go.”

Ah, shit. He knew the bad stuff was coming, but he hadn’t expected this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Something had swirled its way inside Angelique, consuming her with evil from the inside out.

She knew the demon within her had been pressing hard to break free. Desperate to get to Isabelle, she'd allowed the sensations to envelop her, hoping they would give her some insight into what was going on with her sister. But she'd hurt Ryder in the process, and that was unacceptable. That had stopped her cold, frightened her. The capacity for what she could do . . .

Dear God help her.

Fighting the sweet malevolence—it was so strong, so easy to let it run wild—she tamped it down, forcing it back to the recesses, like shutting a prison cell door. It was still there—she could see it—but for now, it was contained.

Relief filled her. She could master this evil inside her. At least for now.

“I’m sorry.” She let go of his arm, hating that she could already see the dark imprint of her hand there. He was strong—muscular. It took a lot for her to mark him. “Ryder, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s okay.” He cupped her cheek, his tenderness more than she deserved. He seemed more worried than angry. “You’re upset and you need to see Isabelle. I’d fight anyone who got in the way of someone I loved.”

She nodded, grateful for his forgiveness when she couldn’t forgive herself. Her stomach twisted in pain. How could she hurt him? Did Ryder see his father in her, in what she’d just done? She’d been so cold, had known what she was doing, what she’d said to him, what she’d done to him . . . and yet she hadn’t stopped.

No. She *had* stopped. That was the difference. She had stopped it, right?

“Don’t,” Ryder warned, his gaze narrowing as if he knew her train of thought. “I love you. You’re desperate to get to your sister. And I’m a tough guy. I can take what you dish out.”

“Is everything okay?” Michael hustled up beside them.

Ryder nodded. “Fine. We’re just strategizing the approach to going through that smoke and had a disagreement about the best way to handle it. Angie wanted to barge through it and I convinced her we needed to think this out first. But it’s her sister—you know how it is.”

He wasn’t going to tell Michael about what she’d just done. She so didn’t deserve Ryder’s faith in her.

“I understand. But Ryder’s right. You needed to wait for the rest of us so we can push in together. You don’t know what’s on the other side.”

Yes, she did know what was on the other side. Isabelle, surrounded by demons. Demons that would protect her sister.

Stress. Extreme duress seemed to bring out the demon in her. She made a mental note to be stronger next time, to be aware of what was happening before she lost control. She had to get a handle on this demon thing or it would consume her.

She was never going to hurt Ryder again.

Nevertheless, she nodded. “Of course. I’m sorry, it’s just that I’ve been waiting so long to get her back and I’m worried.”

“Don’t be. We’re almost there,” Michael said.

Ryder slid his hand around her waist, pulling her against him. “We’ll be fine.”

“I know.” She loved that it was “we,” not just “she.”

“You got control now?”

“Yes.” She wasn’t going to let that demon out again. Not at the risk of hurting Ryder or the others.

“Don’t be afraid to play with the demon,” he whispered in her ear. “I’ve got your back, and you may need to use that strong blood inside you.”

She tilted her head back. “Are you sure? I don’t know if I can control it yet.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.”

Her eyes drifted closed for a second. “I love you, Ryder.”

Angelique took a deep breath and prayed that she’d find something left of the Isabelle she knew and loved when they stepped through the mist.

Michael led the way. It was obvious that the smoke wasn’t made by their weapon fire alone. It had to have been manufactured by the Sons of Darkness.

They were outside, definitely. Angelique inhaled the odor of wet grass, of dirt; she felt the chill of night. She was stuck in the middle of all the hunters, so she followed blindly, not knowing what she’d see on the other side.

She had always loved the dark, never minded working alone in a cave by herself or on any dig all alone. Now the dark unnerved her. Demons hid in the darkness.

The glasses she wore were very cool, though. Kind of like being able to visualize clearly in a blue light way. Though nothing showed up in color, everything she saw was very sharp.

The smoke began to clear. She still didn’t know where they were. No landmarks, just thick woods. Trees, bushes, no distinct path.

She swiveled around, struck by something so compelling it caused a sharp pain in her stomach.

There, down the path, stood Isabelle.

She looked the same and yet different. She was dressed all in black, a long gown covering her completely. It flowed around her as if it were alive. And her eyes appeared darker, more . . . menacing.

Angelique shivered, hoping she was just imagining some transformation in her sister that didn't exist. She scanned the area around Izzy. At her sister's feet, the black diamond—glowing with a pulsing light, stronger than it ever had been before.

She had to see her, touch her. She had to know.

“Izzy.”

“Angelique, wait.”

She heard Ryder's voice behind her, but she didn't heed it. The pull toward her sister, toward the black diamond, was too strong.

Isabelle held her arms out and smiled, and Angelique ran, her boots digging in the hard dirt in time to the rapid pounding of her heartbeat. She had to hurry, because she knew the hunters were right on her heels.

She flew into Izzy's arms, pulling her close. Isabelle wrapped her arms around her and held tight. Angelique hugged her sister close, burying her face in her hair.

“Are you all right?”

Isabelle didn't answer. It was then that Angelique paused long enough to realize how cold Isabelle's skin was. Even through her clothes, her sister felt like ice.

Like death.

Angelique pulled back, and gasped.

There was no life in Isabelle's eyes. Red, glowing, only malice reflected in her sister's once beautiful, lightfilled eyes.

"Oh, Izzy. What have they done to you?"

Isabelle lips curled, her teeth showing the beginnings of fangs. "They've done nothing to me, Angie, other than make me perfect. They'll do the same for you if you come with me."

Angelique heard the hunters stop behind her, knew they had weapons raised, knew they saw what she did.

Isabelle seethed with evil, as if snakes crawled over her sister's skin. Angelique could swear she heard hissing. Her own skin crawled and she shuddered, her stomach turning.

Her sister was a demon. Fully and wholly demon.

No! She refused to believe it. She wouldn't let Izzy go that easily.

"Isabelle, please. I know you're still in there, that there's warmth and humanity inside you. Come back with me."

The black diamond at Isabelle's feet hummed, as if growling a warning at Angelique.

"I belong here, Angie. The Sons of Darkness are my people, my family."

As soon as she said it, men materialized. Ten of them, dressed all in black, appeared behind Isabelle. They towered over her, their faces devoid of emotion, their eyes black and lacking any soul or humanity.

The Sons of Darkness.

All around them, demons came forward, out of the darkness, out of nowhere, surrounding them. Purebreds, and those Angelique and Ryder had battled back at the cottage—the ones with the glowing blue eyes and mist surrounding them. Angelique held her breath against the force of such evil in one place. It was palpable, suffocating her.

One of the Sons of Darkness moved forward, and Angelique took a quick step back. He radiated such tremendous heat the hairs on her arms felt singed.

Isabelle didn't even flinch when he wrapped his arm around her waist. Her smile widened.

"Angelique. How nice of you to come back to us."

In an instant, Ryder was at her side, his weapon pointed at the demon Lord. "Back off," he said. He started to pull her away, but Angelique refused to budge.

"No, it's okay. I'm fine here."

The demon Lord's lips curled upward. "She doesn't want to go with you, hunter. She wishes to remain with her sister."

"She doesn't want anything to do with you fuckers."

Ryder tugged at Angelique again, but she didn't move. Didn't he understand how important it was that she remove her sister first?

"Ryder, please. I have to get Isabelle."

"Tase. Take her," Isabelle said.

The one Isabelle called Tase laughed. "She'll come to us, my queen."

His queen? Oh, no. Angelique couldn't allow this.

Dalton moved past Angelique and Ryder, even closer than Angelique had been to Tase. That heat must be unbearable, yet Dalton didn't even flinch. He ignored Tase, focusing only on Izzy.

"Isabelle."

Recognition seemed to flicker in Isabelle's eyes for a fraction of a second, but she resumed staring straight ahead again.

“You can’t keep her, Tase. She’s not one of you,” Dalton said, reaching his hand out to Isabelle. “Come on, Isabelle. Come with me.”

Isabelle tilted her head and frowned at Dalton.

Oh, please, please, let her go with Dalton.

“No!” Tase said, his voice thundering in the darkness. “She is ours.”

Whatever influence Tase had on Izzy was too strong. She straightened and her eyes went vacant again. But for a moment, Dalton had reached her. That gave Angelique hope.

Izzy was still in there.

Angelique tugged on Dalton’s shirt to get his attention, then on Ryder’s, drawing them away. “I need to push her. I have to do something to make her see me . . . really see me.”

“You might have a fight on your hands,” Ryder countered.

She nodded, realizing what he meant. “I know.”

“Can you handle it?”

“I can pull back when I need to. Trust me?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “Yes. Do it.”

“I’ll back you up,” Dalton said. “She’s not lost.”

Bless him, she so needed to hear that. She grabbed Dalton’s hand and squeezed it.

“I’ll let the others know,” Dalton said. “We’ll take on the Sons of Darkness and their demons. You deal with your sister.”

She nodded as Dalton inched away, then turned to Ryder. “Don’t let them kill her. Not until I’ve tried everything I can.”

“I’ll do what I can, darlin’.”

That was all she could ask for.

Angelique kept her focus on Tase, Isabelle, and the demons. They seemed to be waiting, as if they knew the hunters were going to attack, were going to try to rescue Isabelle. It was as if they had planned this.

Perhaps they had. Maybe they thought the Realm of Light was no threat, that they could be easily defeated and Angelique could be taken, would do anything to be reunited with her sister.

They were wrong.

She’d kill Isabelle herself before she allowed her sister to become a part of the Sons of Darkness. The realization was like a knife in her heart. But she *would* do it. She’d never let her sister live as a demon. Isabelle wouldn’t want that. Not the Izzy she knew and loved.

Angelique just prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

Ryder and Dalton reappeared at her side. Dalton gave her a slight nod and she exhaled, taking comfort in the hunters having her back.

Now if only she could win this battle. No, she *had* to win. Isabelle’s life depended on it. She straightened her shoulders and looked at her sister, using the tone she’d always used when Isabelle had done something wrong.

“Isabelle, enough of this. It’s over. You’re coming with me, now.”

“She’s not listening,” Tase replied. “She’s under our influence.”

“The lady isn’t talking to you,” Ryder said, leveling his weapon.

Tase raised his hand and the demons moved forward, in front of the Lords.

Angelique shuddered a breath. She had to focus only on her sister, not what was about to happen around her.

“Dalton and I’ll protect you. You get to Isabelle,” Ryder said, then he and Dalton pulled away and began to fight.

Angelique tried to call up whatever this demon blood was within her. But could she bring it out at will? She’d tried before, and failed. If she was unsuccessful now, she’d lose Isabelle—she was certain of it.

Everything happened at once. The demons rushed, but Angelique had to focus past them. Dalton and Ryder fired their lasers, and it was like a skirmish on a battlefield. Angelique raised her weapons, positioning herself behind the hunters as they pressed forward to battle the demons.

Smoke, bodies, and the rush of warrior against warrior filled her field of vision as demons battled hunters. The purebreds were fast, but without physical contact they were no match for the hunters’ weaponry. They fell and melted to the ground. The other ones, the newer type of demons, Dalton and Ryder handled with the new guns outfitted with silver bullets. Angelique tried to stay out of the way as they fired on the creatures, ignoring their howls of pain as the three of them barreled ahead in order to make their way to Isabelle.

Angelique pivoted around Ryder and fired to his side, killing one of the new demons. As soon as she did, another came up around her and she blasted that one, too.

Now she understood what Ryder felt—this love of killing. Every time one fell, she felt a surge of victory, a thrill that she had taken one down. But more kept coming.

Anger that these creatures were keeping her from her sister made her blood run hot. And the more that fury boiled up inside her, the more the demon lurking just beneath her skin wanted out.

Which was exactly the result she wanted to achieve by the time they cleared the demons and landed in front of Isabelle again. She wasn’t even out of breath. She was charged, energized, filled with fury, and ready to burst. She tapped into that frustration and anger and let it free.

“Let her go,” she demanded of Tase.

He released his arm from around Isabelle. “Go to your sister,” he said to Izzy. “Convince her to join us.”

Isabelle seemed to float forward, her smile not connected to her eyes. Her gaze still bore that vacant look, as if the sister Angelique knew and loved wasn’t in the shell of her body.

But when Isabelle stopped only inches from her, her eyes cleared, and her smile was genuine. “Angie.”

Hope sprang. Had Isabelle broken free of their control or was it a trick?

“Is it you?”

Izzy nodded. “Of course. I’m still me.”

Angelique reached for Isabelle’s hands. Icy cold. “Please leave them and come with me.”

Izzy shook her head, her smile serene. “I don’t want to. Don’t you understand? I’m happy here.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. They have you under some kind of spell.”

Isabelle laughed. “No, they don’t. I’m with them because I want to be here. don’t you see? This is where I belong, where I’ve always belonged.”

Angelique shook her head. “You don’t belong with them. You’re not a demon.”

“I am. I feel it inside me.” Isabelle fisted her hands and pulled them up to her breastbone. “There’s this rush of power I always knew was there, but I couldn’t bring it out. When I touched the black diamond . . . it knew. It welcomed me and let my power soar free.”

Angelique fought the frustration threatening to send her spiraling into tears. She had to remain steady and calm in order to convince Isabelle of the mistake she was making. “Look at me, Izzy. I carry the same blood as you. I’m not evil. Neither are you.”

Her sister shuttered her lids and tilted her head. “Don’t knock it ’til you try it. Do you have any idea of the strength we can wield? Alone I’m powerful. Together we could be unstoppable.”

“Enough, Isabelle. You don’t want this. Mother wouldn’t have wanted this for you.”

Isabelle frowned. “Mother always believed I would fall into darkness. I knew she thought there was something wrong with me. I didn’t know what it was. Now I do. I’m just fulfilling the prophecy. She was right.”

“Did you read the diary? Really read it?”

“Over and over again. That’s how I realized my destiny.”

“No, you didn’t read all of it. Because if you did you would have read the part where Mother said she loved you. She didn’t fear you. She didn’t wish for your destruction or your downfall. She wanted to save you. She. Loved. You.”

Isabelle blinked. Were those tears glistening in her sister’s eyes? *Come on, Izzy. Come back to me.*

“Mother foresaw the darkness within me.”

Angelique shook her head, refusing to give up. “I’m not buying this. Deep inside I know my sister. You want light, not darkness. Now enough of the dramatics. You want attention. You always have. But not this way.”

Isabelle’s eyes narrowed. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Angelique knew that attacking Isabelle would rile her. It also might snap her out of this . . . whatever kind of spell the Sons of Darkness had her under. Fighting with her might just do the trick.

“Don’t I? Knock this off, Izzy, and quit acting like a child. Game over. Let’s go home before you really embarrass our family name.” She jerked Isabelle’s hands, pulling her toward the other hunters.

Isabelle squeezed her hands. It hurt. Angelique gasped at the pressure, the pain, horrified at the transformation on her sister’s face, the pure demonic visage that now appeared before her. Where once stood beauty there was now ugliness, a horrible face, a widening forehead, red eyes, and, as she opened her mouth, dripping fangs.

Angelique wanted to scream, to pull away and run. This was not her sister.

“No. You will come with *me*,” Isabelle said with a low growl, turning the tables on Angelique, dragging her toward Tase.

Rage and frustration at her inability to reach Isabelle burst within her. She called up strength she didn’t know she had and dug in her heels, burying them in the dirt until Isabelle couldn’t pull at her any longer.

Her sister turned, her gaze one of murderous rage. “Don’t fight me, Angie.”

She jerked back, and it became a superpower tug-of-war, both of them yanking on each other, reaching out to grab at skin and clothing. Angelique didn’t even know where Ryder or the others were. She had completely tuned out the battle behind her. She hoped and prayed he was all right, that the hunters had held their own with the demons.

She intended to win this battle with her sister. She needed there to be hunters still alive to bring Isabelle back to when this was over.

Izzy was strong. So damn strong. Angelique was having a difficult time keeping up with her. She felt the rage within her sister, the sense of fury. And she knew where it came from.

Because she’d chosen a slightly different path from their mother’s and Angelique’s, Isabelle had always felt less than worthy in their mother’s eyes. And Tase had played right into Izzy’s insecurities, calling her his queen.

To Tase, Isabelle was worthy of worship, of his love.

“He doesn’t love you,” Angelique said, digging her own claws into Isabelle’s skin in order to capture her sister’s attention. “He’s using you. The Sons of Darkness aren’t capable of giving you what you need, Isabelle.”

“You’re wrong,” Isabelle said, using her strength to whip Angelique around so her back pressed against Isabelle’s chest. Izzy laid her palm against Angelique’s throat, her long claws so near Angelique’s carotid artery that Angelique stilled, holding her breath, no longer certain whether or not Isabelle would hurt her.

“I am everything to the Sons of Darkness. I am unique, their queen. No one else is like me. I can have whatever I want.”

Would her sister really do this? Good God, had Isabelle really left her?

“Do you need to kill me to prove your loyalty to them?” she asked. “Is that the kind of love you’re looking for, Izzy? You have to kill your sister?”

“I don’t need to kill you, Angelique. Unless you refuse to become one with us. Then you’re of no use. I’d rather see you dead than fighting against us.”

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t break the hold Isabelle had on her. Her demon strength was growing, but no match for the darkness within Isabelle.

Angelique had lost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dalton pivoted and fired a silver bullet into the chest of a charging demon, feeling a sense of satisfaction when smoke poured out of the wounds and the demon dematerialized.

He hadn't yet figured out if those silver bullets killed the new demons, or if they just disappeared to regenerate. That was for the Realm to figure out, not him.

When the smoke cleared, he charged forward, lasering and shooting demons in his wake, until he moved to the front where the line of the Sons of Darkness stood, unmoving, their arms crossed.

In front of the demon Lords was Isabelle, holding Angelique against her chest. Her claws were nearly embedded in Angelique's throat.

Shit. Not good. *Come on, Isabelle. This isn't you. Fight.* It wasn't too late for her. But did she know that?

She'd better figure it out soon, because he caught Ryder out of the corner of his eyes, barreling toward them. Dalton flung out an arm to stop him.

"Don't. You'll kill Angelique."

Ryder dug his heels in, panting from the exertion of the battle and no doubt panic on Angelique's behalf. He lifted his head and shot Dalton a venomous glare. In this, Dalton was his enemy and he knew it. "Isabelle is going to kill her."

"Let me talk to Isabelle. I can reach her."

Ryder considered it, then said, "You've got thirty seconds, then I'm taking her out." He leveled his laser and took aim at Isabelle's head. And Ryder

was a damn good shot.

Dalton gave a quick nod. “Understood.” He inched toward Isabelle. She stared at him, her eyes cold.

“Isabelle. Let Angelique go.”

Isabelle grinned. When she lifted her upper lip, he saw the fangs. “She’s mine now. Either she becomes one of us or she dies.”

“You’d kill your sister?”

Isabelle shrugged. “My loyalty lies with the Sons of Darkness. They’re my family now.”

Dalton slanted a glance at Tase, who nodded in satisfaction.

Bastard. They’d deal with the Sons of Darkness later.

“I would rather die than join those scum-sucking, lower-than-life, dirt-eating bastards of the devil,” Angelique said, her eyes rimmed in red, her own claws digging into Isabelle’s arm. Blood dripped where Angelique embedded her nails into Isabelle’s flesh. But Isabelle hadn’t yet drawn blood from Angelique’s throat. That was a good sign. She’d hesitated. Dalton didn’t think even Isabelle realized that.

Isabelle didn’t register emotion at Angelique’s venomous tirade. “Are you sure, dear sister? Because they can offer you much more than the human world ever could. They’ve promised me immortality, power, riches. I will live among humans and rule in the darkness. I’ll have everything I’ve ever wanted. I’m going to be their queen.”

“But you’ll lose your soul. I’d rather see you die than let them have you, Izzy. I’m sorry.” Tears ran down Angelique’s cheeks as she struggled, finally breaking free of Isabelle’s tight hold on her throat. Angelique bent her head and bit down on her sister’s forearm.

Isabelle growled in pain, then lashed out, grasping Angelique by the throat with one hand. She raised the other, her claws held high as if preparing to

swipe them across Angelique's exposed throat.

Dalton knew he had only a split second to save Isabelle's life, because Ryder was going to shoot her.

He slipped in between Ryder's weapon and Isabelle, latching on to her upraised arm. A risky move given Isabelle's demon strength, but one that stunned her. She let go of Angelique, who stumbled back and fell to her knees.

"Don't do that, babe," he said, keeping his voice low. "Come back to me."

She frowned, blinked.

"I need you, Isabelle. We need each other."

She tilted her head, studying him.

"We'll figure a way out—together. Let me help you. And maybe—" he paused, moved into her, whispered against her so only she could hear. "Just maybe, you can save me, too."

The only way he could reach her was to be honest.

And he just had been.

He did need her to save himself, even if that was the most selfish act of all. But if it saved Isabelle's life, her soul, then it was worth it.

Her eyes widened. In an instant, she changed, the demon in her gone. Then he saw it.

Hope. Desperation. Apology. She hadn't said a word, but Dalton had heard her cry for help.

He knew then that he had her. For a split second, he had her. The real Isabelle. The human one.

He hated doing this, but it was the only way. Grabbing the Taser, he shoved it hard into her side, shocking her. Her eyes widened and she shuddered as the voltage entered her body. She had no time to change back, no time to adapt to the sudden shock and call upon her demon strength. She went limp in his arms. He swept her up and cradled her against his chest.

It worked.

Angelique looked up at him, still fighting for breath.

“Thank you,” she said, the tears still falling down her cheeks. “Thank you for saving her life.”

“No!”

Tase’s booming voice thundered over the noise of battle.

“You are not worthy to touch her,” Tase said. “You are lower than her, one of the beasts of the earth. She will grind you under her feet.”

Dalton ignored Tase. He’d heard it all before. The demon couldn’t hurt him. Like it or not, Isabelle had made her choice.

“Get her the hell out of here before she comes to,” Ryder said, stepping between Tase and Dalton. “We’ll take care of them.”

Dalton nodded and backed away. The hunters rushed forward and formed a line in front of him, but as he turned, Michael and Lou were there.

“You might have temporarily halted what she was about to do, but she’s lost,” Michael said.

Dalton knew better, but said nothing.

“I’m afraid I have to agree with Michael,” Lou said. “Darkness has overtaken her.”

“You know what you have to do,” Michael continued, searching for Angelique. She had lifted a weapon and stood in line next to Ryder.

“Don’t let her sister see it,” Michael said. “Take her away and deal with it. We’ll keep the demons occupied.”

Dalton nodded and turned, running with Isabelle in his arms, his feet pounding the dirt, his clothes tearing as he zoomed by bushes and tree limbs. He held Isabelle close, not wanting her to suffer any harm from his careless run through the thick vegetation.

When he reached the church parking lot, he grabbed the keys to the SUV. He unlocked the vehicle and slid a still unconscious Isabelle inside, buckled her up. He skirted the front end of the vehicle and turned around to take a look back at where he’d come from.

He was too far away now. They couldn’t even see him, though it was possible Lou or Michael could feel . . .

No, they were too occupied with the battle. It would be a while before they knew. They’d just assume he really was taking her far enough away to . . . get the job done, so that Angelique wouldn’t bear witness to it.

He slid into the driver’s seat and glanced over at Isabelle. Asleep, she had the face of an angel. So innocent in all this.

For a moment back there, he’d seen the light in her eyes, the pleading for help.

She’d wanted out, an escape from the darkness.

A chance for redemption. And he was going to give her every chance to crawl out of the hell the Sons of Darkness had put her in. Even at the cost of his own future, possibly his own life.

Because he knew what it was like to walk in darkness, to be one of the damned.

He refused to allow Isabelle to suffer the same fate.

Angelique couldn't let her concern about her sister blind her to the task at hand. There were still Sons of Darkness to battle, demons to take down, and the black diamond, which continued to pulse and hum at Tase's feet.

She blamed the black diamond for transforming her sister into a monster. It had to be destroyed. Which meant the hunters had to wrest it away from the Sons of Darkness.

From her position on the ground, she was only a few feet away from it. The hunters were engaged in battling the demons. No one paid attention to her.

She stayed crouched, inching her way closer. Smoke and bodies danced around her, giving her the diversion she needed.

Chancing a glance upward, she could see the demons doing all the work, maintaining a front line of defense to protect the demon Lords. But that line was dropping, dropping . . .

She covered her head just as a barrage of electricity and laser fire slammed into the Sons of Darkness. They raised their hands to ward off the assault, and Angelique took the opportunity. She pushed off and ran like hell to the black diamond, snatched it up and, without pausing to see if anyone noticed, turned and dashed in the opposite direction.

The diamond's power pulsed against her as she held it cradled tight to her chest. The rock was definitely alive.

Angelique skirted the battle and made it to the back of the group of hunters. Lou waited there for her with his hands held out.

"Give it to me."

She was more than happy to hand it over, since she'd needed all her power and strength to fight the lure of the diamond for the short period of time she'd held it. It was like a sickening sweet temptation. Did it have some kind of hypnotic power? Was that what had happened to Izzy?

She hated that thing. "What's in there?"

Lou held the black diamond up, palming it, his eyes narrowed. “A demon.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’ll explain later. Right now you need to back away, Angelique. We’re about to do battle.”

Battle? What kind of battle?

She stepped away, pulled her laser in case she needed to shoot it, and watched as Lou grasped the diamond between his palms.

Did the diamond actually growl, or was that her imagination?

“What the fuck is going on?” Derek asked, moving up to stand beside Angelique. So did the rest of them, Ryder on her other side.

“There’s a demon inside the black diamond,” she said, turning around. “Where are the Sons of Darkness?”

“We hit ’em with everything we had and they just disappeared,” Ryder said. “Vanished.”

“Pussies. They couldn’t handle the heat,” Punk added with a satisfied nod.

“They’re not defeated,” Michael said, his brows knit in a tight frown. “They never are.”

“They’ll be back?” Trace asked.

Michael shook his head. “For now, no. They’ve done what they came to do.”

Angelique didn’t understand Michael’s words.

“There’s really a demon in the black diamond?” Mandy’s gaze was focused on Lou. “What’s he doing with it?”

“I have no idea,” Angelique said.

The black diamond's light grew, seeming to glow beyond its surface now, the hum growing louder until her ears hurt. The light it put off was blinding—still blue, but now more luminous, so bright Angelique had to shield her eyes from the intensity.

The area around them grew colder. Lou's hands were covered in ice and the ground around him was sprinkled with white crystals.

"Is that thing trying to get out?" Trace asked.

"Yes," Michael said. "The demon is attempting to break free."

"What kind of demon is it?" Angelique asked, unable to tear her gaze away from it.

"Powerful."

"As strong as the Sons of Darkness?" she asked.

"More so. Why do you think they wanted someone or something that would activate it?"

"So why now? Isabelle spent all that time with it. I thought she was the trigger."

"Isabelle was the catalyst to bring it out of dormancy," Michael said. "Keepers have the power to actually release the demon from the black diamond."

Angelique's jaw dropped. "Why would we want to do that?"

"Just watch," Michael said.

The blue light surrounded the outside of the black diamond now. Lou moved his hands, palmed the bottom of the diamond and raised his hand over the top of it. As he did, the light lifted to meet his hand, seeming to dance underneath his palm. He crouched and laid the diamond on the ground, then slowly lifted, the light following his hand as he stood.

It was like watching a genie appear from a bottle, a sinuous, seductive dance against Lou's hand, swirling between his fingers, wrapping around his forearm.

Angelique was transfixed. This was the demon that had been hiding inside the black diamond? She had been carrying a demon around with her all that time after she'd escaped the caves in Australia? She shuddered at the realization.

The light began to materialize into shape, grow larger and form into a body, blue mixing with white as the object undulated before Lou's raised hands. Legs, hips, the curve of a waist, long, blue-white hair . . .

The demon inside the black diamond was female!

"Do you see that?" she asked Ryder.

"Yes."

"I'll be goddamned," Derek muttered. "It's a girl."

"Most definitely feminine," Gina said with a nod.

"Did you know this, Michael?" Angelique asked.

"Yes."

She supposed it didn't really matter what gender the demon was. Or maybe it did matter. It was just damn odd that the demon inside the black diamond was female.

And did it ever seem to have a thing for Lou. Or maybe Keepers in general? As soon as its arms and hands materialized, it reached out for him.

Shockingly, Lou held his arms straight from his sides as if in surrender. It came toward him, floating like a ghostly specter, surrounding him, touching his face, his shoulders.

She was beautiful, her face like porcelain, her features perfection, as was her body. Angelique held her breath as the demon caressed Lou's face, pressing herself against him in a way that could only be described as . . . affectionate, almost like a hug.

What on earth was going on?

Lou wore no expression, just nodded, his arms still outspread as the demon held on to his shoulders.

"I don't like this," Derek whispered.

Lou closed his eyes, and a strong wind kicked up, blowing his hair back, pressing his clothes to his body. The demon mimicked Lou's stance and it was like looking at two mirrored objects.

Suddenly, the demon moved closer to Lou, then against him. They were face-to-face now. Lou's eyes were still closed, their noses were almost touching.

And then the demon disappeared.

Inside Lou!

Angelique blinked, so shocked it took her a few seconds to find her voice. She looked over at Ryder, who seemed as stunned as she was.

"What just happened?" she asked, turning to Michael.

"Lou absorbed the demon," Michael said, his mouth set in a grim line.

From the grimace on Michael's face, whatever had just happened wasn't good. Yet Michael had done nothing to stop it.

"What the hell does that mean?" Mandy asked, frowning. "That thing just slid right into him." Mandy went to Lou, who still had his eyes closed, still hadn't moved yet. She turned back to Michael. "Is he . . . all right?"

"Leave him alone, Mandy," Michael said.

“Now what?” Ryder asked.

“Now we wait. It shouldn’t take long.”

Wait for what? “Is the demon actually inside him?” Angelique asked.

Michael nodded.

Lou opened his eyes. They were as blue as the demon had been, no longer Lou’s natural eye color.

Lou laid his arms at his sides, breathed deeply in and exhaled. “I don’t have much time,” he said, his gaze focused on Michael.

“Understood,” Michael said.

“What’s he talking about?” Mandy asked. “We need to do something.”

“We are going to do something. We need to kill him.”

“What?” Angelique couldn’t believe what Michael had just said.

“No.” Mandy shook her head. “That’s not what we do.”

Michael lowered his head. “In this instance, it’s what we *must* do.”

Pain stabbed Angelique’s stomach. She looked at Lou, who seemed to wear an expression of utter calm and peace. Surely he didn’t expect them to . . .

“I don’t fucking think so,” Derek said, leveling his gun, then lowering it again. He turned to Michael. “How do we get that thing out of him?”

“We don’t,” Michael said. “Not while Lou’s alive.”

“This is bullshit,” Mandy said, her gaze flitting from Michael, then back at Lou. “Surely you don’t expect us to—”

Mandy reached out and touched Lou’s arm. A zap of something blue, like electricity, shot from Lou onto Mandy’s hand. The shock made her cry out,

snatch her hand back.

“What the hell?” Mandy asked, looking down at the redness on her hand, then back at Lou.

“I’m sorry,” Lou said, his jaw clenched tight. “I can’t help it. It’s very strong. I can’t hold out much longer.”

“Lou retrieved the demon from the black diamond,” Michael said, his voice picking up a sense of urgency. “It was the only way. Now we have to destroy it.”

“By killing him, and the demon along with it,” Ryder finished for him.

“Yes.”

Angelique refused to believe this. Destroying a Keeper? They were rare and valued.

“Do it.” Lou’s voice was filled with strain, the same he showed on his features. “Hurry.”

“We all know that our jobs aren’t always easy,” Michael said. “But we do what’s necessary to destroy the Sons of Darkness and all they represent. Lou knew it might come to this someday. He’s accepted it.”

“No.” Mandy croaked the word.

“I’m not doin’ it,” Punk said.

“Please,” Lou pleaded. “I can’t hold it in here much longer.”

“It’s now or never,” Michael said.

“You do it,” Derek said, his jaw tight.

Michael shook his head. “I can’t. As a Keeper, it’s forbidden.”

“Goddamit. Lou?” Derek turned to him.

Lou shook his head, his body shuddering now.

With a deep sigh, Derek raised his gun. Punk muttered a curse and did the same. Mandy followed suit, her eyes filled with moisture. Reluctantly, they all pointed their lasers at Lou, but no one seemed willing to pull the trigger. Angelique already knew she wouldn't be the one to destroy a human.

Lou was sweating with the effort to hold the demon inside him. His chin rested on his chest, his hands clenched into tight fists.

“Please.”

Lou's single word was a whispered plea.

Maybe it was her imagination, but she saw that demon shimmering inside him. Trying to get out, maybe?

Oh, no. That couldn't happen.

Angelique didn't know who shot first. Maybe that was a good thing. A split second later, they were all firing, blue light hitting Lou square in the chest. He jerked back, his entire body shuddering violently with the impact.

Tears streaked down Angelique's face as she watched the destruction of a human being. She wanted to cover her face and not watch, to sob at the savagery of the act, but she knew what was being done was necessary in order to kill a demon. Lou had made the ultimate sacrifice, one she wasn't sure she'd have been able to make.

When they stopped, there was nothing left of Lou, or the demon that had taken up residence inside him.

Afterward, there were no words. With zero emotion showing on her face, Mandy shouldered her weapon, pivoted, and walked away. Derek dropped his head down and Gina laced her fingers with his, tears streaming down her face.

The grief was palpable.

It was over. Lou was dead. And so was the demon inside him. The black diamond sat on the ground, now a lifeless dark rock.

Ryder wrapped his arm around her and lifted her chin.

“Are you all right?”

“No. I’m miserable. Why did this have to happen?”

“I don’t know, darlin’. It sucks. But at least that thing inside the black diamond is dead.” Ryder turned to Michael. “It is dead, isn’t it?”

Michael nodded, his expression grim. “The demon’s dead.”

And so was Lou. She hated even thinking it. It made her hurt all over.

“Let’s go,” Michael said. “I’ll debrief you all when we get back to the Realm headquarters.”

Angelique inhaled on a shudder, then allowed Ryder to lead them back to the vehicles.

One of the SUV’s was missing. “Where’s the other car?” she asked.

“Dalton . . . took Isabelle away so the Sons of Darkness wouldn’t get to her,” Michael said.

There was something vague about his response, but she pushed it away. She’d ask him about it when they got back to headquarters. There were too many other things occupying her mind right now.

After they said their good-byes to Father Vintaldi, they piled into the one remaining SUV, crushed together like sardines. Angelique stared out the window at the church, still unable to fathom what had just happened.

Ryder put his arm around her shoulder and she laid her head there, comforted by his presence and wanting to comfort him, too. Killing Lou had to have hurt him, and yet he was the one soothing her. He kissed the top of her head and she relaxed against him. The only thing she could do was

be there for him, love him, just as he loved her. And maybe they had a couple things to be grateful for.

The Sons of Darkness had disappeared, but they hadn't taken Isabelle. And the hunters had killed a lot of demons. The black diamond was obliterated.

There was sadness, though. Isabelle had shown how much darkness she possessed. They didn't even know if she could come back from it.

And they'd lost one of their own in the process. A kind, wonderful man she was just beginning to get to know.

Really, they had won nothing.

"We've lost."

"We were supposed to emerge triumphant, and look at us. Not only did we not keep Isabelle, we lost the black diamond, and Drucilla within it."

Tase paced back and forth in front of his brothers, listening to them lament. He shook his head at their stupidity.

They could never see the big picture.

"You are all fools. Don't you see how much we've won?"

They ceased their wailing and focused on him.

"How can you say that?" Badon asked.

"Easy. If you'd stop your blaming and bickering long enough, you'd see how much we really did profit from all that happened."

Kal crossed his arms. "Do explain it to us, brother."

"Isabelle is in darkness, lost to the human world. We saw to that. You all felt it. She is still one with us and will remain so, regardless of her

location.”

“That is true,” Aron said with a reluctant nod. “She was immersed.”

“We will someday use that to our benefit. Everything doesn’t have to occur right now. You all must learn patience. Isabelle will have her time of usefulness.”

Now that he had their rapt attention, he went on.

“Yes, we lost Drucilla. But great things sometimes come at great sacrifice. Though it would have been beneficial to have her as one of us and wielding her power at our sides, she served her purpose.”

“In what way?” Badon asked.

“She died, but she took a Keeper of the Realm of Light with her. And a very powerful Keeper at that. Louis has been a nemesis of ours for years. Now he’s gone, and we have once again taken something the Realm holds dear. We have sliced into their power.”

There were nods of agreement all around.

“Our new demons, though not without flaws, are working out well. With each new generation our goal is coming to fruition. Soon they will be doing our bidding without detection.”

“True,” Badon said. “We are closer than ever in our quest to have our brethren walk among the humans.”

“And there is one more thing,” Tase said, his heated stare making them all decidedly uncomfortable.

“What is that?” Kal asked, his frown showing his confusion.

They didn’t know. They simply weren’t aware. Tase smiled, his grin showing his superiority over his brothers.

“Dalton, one of the hunters, has once again stepped into darkness. He has fallen again.

“The Realm is fractured, falling apart. They will soon pit their own against each other. And we will reap the rewards.”

The Sons of Darkness had won this skirmish.

And soon, they would win the war.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ryder sat outside, needing a half hour or so after he'd left Michael's office. Too much going on in his head and he had to sort it through. The whole atmosphere in Michael's office had been bad. Really bad. Lou had been much more than a leader to all of them. He'd been friend and mentor, even a father figure to some, and he was going to be missed.

And now, in addition to all the grieving, Ryder had more bad news for Angie and he had to figure out how to deliver it.

The truth was always the best way. Angelique was tough. She could handle it, and she deserved honesty.

He found her in the kitchen, staring into a cup of tea. Mandy sat across from her doing the same thing.

"Hey," he said.

Angelique looked up, smiled. "Hey. Where've you been?"

"Outside. Needed a few minutes after the meeting with Michael."

She nodded. Mandy finally dragged her gaze from the porcelain. She didn't smile. She hadn't smiled since they'd returned back from the church.

Mandy had taken Lou's death really hard. She'd been with Lou since she was a kid. He was, essentially, the only father she'd ever known. And she'd had to take part in killing him. Ryder couldn't even imagine how much that was messing with her head.

Derek wasn't handling it well, either. The whole thing was one giant clusterfuck. There were decisions to be made and no one wanted to make

them. But they knew it was going to have to be done, and soon. It had to be. War was war, and it went on, even when someone died.

“Hey, kid, you okay?” he asked, squeezing Mandy’s shoulder as he brushed by.

“Just fucking fine,” she mumbled.

Ryder went to the cabinet and grabbed a cup, filled it with what he hoped was damn strong black coffee, and pulled up a chair next to Angelique.

Mandy pushed back and stood. “I’m going into the workout room to beat the shit out of something.”

“Want me to come with you?” Ryder asked.

Mandy leaned against the doorway and shook her head. “No. Thanks, but no. I’m not good company right now and I need to be alone. I might kill something.” She snorted. “Something else. Hell, I don’t know what I’m talking about. I’ll catch you all later.”

She pushed off the doorway and left the kitchen.

“She’s really hurting bad,” Angelique said, her gaze trailing after Mandy.

“Yeah. Everyone is. Lou was a good guy.”

“I don’t understand what happened out there, Ryder.”

Ryder shrugged. “None of us do. Michael tried to explain about Keepers knowing their destiny, and how no one lives forever. I guess in his way he was attempting to tell us that Lou had been prepared for this.”

She shivered. “That kind of destiny sucks.”

“Yes, it does.”

Angelique studied Ryder. He’d been quiet, and she understood why. She couldn’t even offer him comfort. What could she say? It was hard for her to

comprehend all this, and yet it was now part of her life. “Do you ever get used to it?”

He reached out and smoothed his hand over her hair. “To what?”

“Death.”

“Some parts of it, yes. Losing friends . . . no. It always hurts, but it’s part of what we do. Any one of us could die, Angie. It’s the vow we take. We’ll die defending our world against the Sons of Darkness.”

She blinked back tears, not sure what she’d signed on for. And yet, the man she loved was deeply embroiled in this life, and she wanted to be with him.

“If you can’t handle it—”

She reached up, ran her palm over the rough stubble of his unshaven jaw. “I can handle anything as long as I’m with you. If it’s a day, a month, a year, forever. Whatever it is, I’ll deal with it.”

He leaned in, brushed his lips across hers. “You give me strength I didn’t know I had.”

She smiled. “You were always strong.”

“Not that kind of strength. The kind to believe in myself. I’ll always take care of you.”

“I know you will. And I’ll take care of you. Right here.” She moved her palm to his heart.

He touched his forehead to hers, and Angelique had her first few moments of feeling content in what seemed like a very long time.

Then she pulled back. “So when you met with Michael, did he discuss Dalton and Isabelle? Any word on them yet?”

He frowned. “No. And I need to tell you something.”

His tone sounded ominous. “Okay.”

“Dalton was instructed to take Isabelle away from the church and graveyard.”

“Yes.”

“To destroy her.”

Dread filled her. “No.” She’d refused to think that’s why her sister and Dalton had disappeared. Dalton wouldn’t have killed Izzy. Not him.

“They had no choice. Isabelle had become a full demon. They didn’t want to eliminate her in front of you. She was a threat to the Realm, Angie.”

The logical part of her understood that had been an option, but the emotional side that loved her sister no matter what railed against the thought of it.

She hated asking the question, but she had to know. Her voice, thick with unshed tears, wavered. “Is Izzy dead?”

Ryder dragged her onto his lap. “Not that we’re aware of. They can’t find Dalton. They tracked his cell phone to just outside the church grounds. He must have tossed it.”

Of course. Hope leaped inside her like a sparking flame. “He couldn’t do it, could he?”

“My guess is that he wasn’t able to follow through on his orders to kill her. He stopped me from hitting her with laser fire when she was holding you.”

She leaned back. “You would have destroyed Isabelle?”

His gaze never wavered. “If it came to a choice between you and your sister, then there was no choice. I would have killed her to save your life.”

She couldn’t fault Ryder for putting her first above everyone else, even Isabelle. He loved her that much. “Thank you.”

“But Dalton asked me to wait, said he could get through to her. My guess is he still thinks that.”

“But the Realm doesn’t know where he is?”

Ryder shook his head. “Michael doesn’t have a sense of their location. Dalton’s gone underground, and I’m sure he has Isabelle with him.”

“They’re going to hunt for them, aren’t they?”

Ryder nodded. “Yes. They have to. Dalton disobeyed a Realm order. And the Realm still considers Isabelle a danger.”

“And when they locate them?”

He swept her hair away from her face. “I don’t know, darlin’. I guess that depends on what they discover when they find Dalton and Isabelle.”

At least she had hope. Isabelle wasn’t dead. Somehow, she’d know if Izzy was gone. “Maybe I can help.”

Ryder’s brows lifted. “You want to help find her?”

“I have to know, one way or the other.”

“What if it’s bad?”

“I don’t want her living like that. I couldn’t bear it, knowing my sister was one of them. I’d rather see her dead.”

Ryder nodded, pulled her closer. “Are you still linked to her?”

“I don’t know. Right now I feel . . . nothing, no vibe from her at all. But maybe that’s just shock from Lou’s death. Perhaps the connection with Isabelle will come back. And we don’t know what state she’s in right now. If she’s not . . . conscious or aware, it might affect our link.”

“That’s true. I know the Realm would like you to help.”

“I’m part of the team, aren’t I?”

He squeezed her hip. “You’re part of my team. It’s the only one that counts.”

The feelings she had for him both frightened and elated her. She’d never been so overwhelmed with emotion for one person before. She’d been alone for so long, making all the decisions, carrying the burden.

Now she didn’t have to. She had Ryder by her side.

“I love you, Ryder.”

Light beamed from his eyes. “I love you, too.”

All she needed from him was his love. As long as she had that, anything was possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jaci Burton grew up in Missouri, spent thirteen years in California, and now lives in Oklahoma with her husband and more dogs than she can keep track of. In her spare time she cruises on the back of her husband's Harley, where she enjoys the wind on her face while plotting her next book.

You can read more about Jaci at her website, www.jaciburton.com.

She is also the author of *Hunting the Demon* and *Surviving Demon Island*, both available from Dell.

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